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The Fear of missing out (FOMO): Investigating  
the relationship between sexual FOMO, norm  
misperception and risky sexual behaviour

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## **Abstract**

Popular media indicates that many people, especially women, experience sexual FOMO; the negative feeling that others are having more rewarding, frequent and exciting sexual experiences than you are (Zebroff, 2020). Research on general FOMO suggests that sexual FOMO may have negative effects. Yet, there is little to no empirical research on sexual FOMO, nor on its associated variables. This study uses a social psychological perspective to examine the relationship between sexual FOMO, norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour. In a sample of women in the United Kingdom (N = 249), sexual personal FOMO positively predicted risky sexual behaviour, but an inverse relationship was found for sexual social FOMO. Norm misperception negatively predicted risky sexual behaviour also. Neither sexual personal, nor sexual social FOMO mediated the relationship between norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour. These findings propound that the personal considerations aspect of sexual FOMO may play a role in encouraging risky sexual behaviour, whereas the social comparison component may actually discourage it. Although this is valuable contribution to the research on FOMO, further experimental and longitudinal research is encouraged so that a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between the constructs of this study can be attained.

## **Introduction**

### **Sexual FOMO**

Do you ever feel like you're missing out on interesting and highly fulfilling sexual experiences that others often seem to be having? If so, you're certainly not alone. While there is not a lot of scientific literature on the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) with regard to sexual behaviour, popular media indicates that sexual FOMO is a ubiquitous occurrence. Out of several hundred people that participated in an online survey created by Psychology Today,

more than two thirds report experiencing sexual FOMO (Zebroff, 2020). According to the Urban Dictionary, “FOMOsexuality”, is “a state of arousal, desire and dread brought on by the certainty that everyone else is enjoying more exciting, more frequent and more imaginative sex than you are” (Dad, 2019). Furthermore, previous research indicates that FOMO may have negative consequences. FOMO is typically associated with feelings of anxiety that are expressed through worry or rumination, as well as negative behaviours that aim to mitigate these feelings (Przybylski et al., 2013). As such, sexual FOMO makes for a compelling topic of psychological research.

### **General FOMO versus sexual FOMO**

To date, empirical literature has not yet reported on the prevalence nor the effects of sexual FOMO and therefore it is not yet understood with what types of behaviour sexual FOMO might be associated. Until now, the research mainly focuses on general FOMO and its effects within the online domain of social media. In this context FOMO is defined as the anxiety that social media users experience when they perceive others to be doing/experiencing things that they are not and ultimately, the desire to stay socially connected is amplified (Zhang et al., 2020). As such, evidence indicates that FOMO contributes to problematic internet use as well as compulsive Instagram and Facebook checking (Alt & Boniel-Nissim, 2018; Balta et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2019; Dhir et al., 2018). However, some recent preliminary findings suggest that general FOMO is associated with poor/decreased sleep, as well as greater consumption of alcohol per drinking session and more risky behaviour while under the influence of alcohol (Milyavskaya et al., 2018; Riordan et al., 2015).

Several measures of FOMO exist but they are all social-media context specific. For example “When I have a good time it is important for me to share the details online (e.g., updating status)” (Przybylski et al., 2013 p. 1847). This may be one reason why there is a

paucity of research on FOMO in an offline context (Zhang et al., 2020). Consequently, it is not yet known whether general FOMO can predict different behaviours or whether context-specific behaviours are predicted by distinct types of FOMO. As the prior mentioned literature shows, FOMO's psychological and behavioural effects can be harmful to our wellbeing and for this reason, it is important to develop a better understanding of FOMO and its associated variables.

### **The present study**

In pursuit of addressing some of the aforementioned unresolved research questions, the present study uses a social psychological perspective to explore sexual FOMO and some of its cognitive and behavioural associations. Specifically, the empirical relationship between sexual FOMO, the perception of social norms, and risky sexual behaviour, among women is analysed in this study. The following section begins by outlining the conceptualisation of FOMO. Next, the theoretical basis for examining norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour in association with sexual FOMO is discussed. Finally, the study's hypotheses are stated.

### **How FOMO works**

Originally, Przybylski et al. (2013) used the Self Determination Theory to explain how FOMO occurs conceptually. Theoretically, Self Determination Theory states that an individual's psychological wellbeing stems from the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs; competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Essentially, people who experience poor need satisfaction subsequently endure FOMO. In turn, these people try to alleviate their psychological discomfort with behaviours that will increase their need satisfaction. This conceptualisation of FOMO is often employed in the social-media research context.

However, a more recent conceptualisation by Zhang et al. (2020) claims that FOMO is triggered by psychological threats to the self-concept. The self has two parts; the private and the public self. Accordingly, the private self is an individual's assessment of their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Fenigstein et al., 1975). The public self on the other hand is all the ways that an individual thinks that others perceive them. People like to behave in a way that is consistent with their self-concept and may experience psychological discomfort if there are incongruencies in this regard. Hence, Zhang et al. (2020) propose that FOMO can occur from perceived psychological threats to the private and/or public self, i.e., *personal* and *social* FOMO, respectively.

### **Sexual FOMO and risky sexual behaviour**

These perceived psychological threats to the self-concept (otherwise, FOMO) are understood to encourage people to engage in behaviours that put their physical, emotional and psychological health at risk e.g., excessive alcohol drinking (Riordan et al., 2015). Considering many risk behaviours have the same underlying determinants, it is suggested that sexual FOMO may be a predictor of risky sexual behaviour (Jackson et al., 2012). Risky sexual behaviour includes sexual activities like having multiple sexual partners, one-time sexual encounters, unprotected sexual intercourse and an early sexual debut (Strandberg et al., 2019). What's more, women could be particularly at risk of engaging in these unsafe sexual behaviours as they report experiencing sexual FOMO more than men. Perhaps this sexual FOMO gender disparity is a consequence of women being six times more likely than men to miss out on having an orgasm when they have sex (Zebroff, 2020). If women are dissatisfied with their sex life and believe that others are having more rewarding and enjoyable sexual experiences, they may feel a threat to their private and/or public self; they may experience sexual FOMO. Accordingly, it is proposed that sexual FOMO may encourage women to take part in more

sexual behaviours and thereby increase their chances of engaging in *risky* sexual behaviour specifically.

Engaging in risky sexual behaviour increases one's chances of developing sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), like Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea, and even human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Johnson et al., 2014; Menon et al., 2016; Seth et al., 2011). Additionally, it also increases the likelihood of unwanted pregnancy (Agius et al., 2013). In turn, these kinds of health issues can lead to stress and poor mental, as well as physical well-being (Hall et al., 2015). Other predictors of risky sexual behaviour include alcohol- and illicit drug-use (Agius et al., 2013; Gálvez-Buccollini et al., 2009). Of specific interest to this study, Potard et al. (2008) find that social norms significantly influence risky sexual behaviour, at least among young people.

### **The role of social norms in risky sexual behaviour**

Social norms act as benchmarks that prescribe or proscribe various behaviours for people in society (Chung & Rimal, 2016). However, we are not always accurate in how we perceive norms. One specific type of norm misperception is termed pluralistic ignorance. This occurs when an individual believes that their private attitudes/beliefs are incongruent to the prevalent norm of their social group (Lambert et al., 2003). Prentice and Miller (1996) first demonstrated this phenomenon by showing that college students tend to privately reject the alcohol drinking norms that prevail on university campuses, but also believe that everyone else privately accepts them. Concerning the present study, Cohen and Shotland (1996) find that people think that the average peer of the same gender expects sex much sooner in a relationship than they do. Further, people believe others (both of the same gender and of the opposite gender) are significantly more comfortable with hooking up behaviours than they are (Lambert et al., 2003). Thus, even though it statistically cannot be the case, each member generally

believes that the other members of their social group are comparatively more promiscuous than they are (Martens et al., 2006). Crucially, the misperception of norms, in this case pluralistic ignorance, plays a significant role in influencing people's behaviour (Graham et al., 1991; Larimer & Neighbors, 2003; Pariera, 2013). What's more, this promiscuity-norm misperception may lead people to engage in more sexual behaviour in the hope of conforming to the (misperceived) normative standard; increasing their likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviour.

### **The association between norm misperception and sexual FOMO**

These promiscuity norm misperceptions are based on how we perceive others' behaviour in comparison to our own. As outlined previously, sexual FOMO works in a similar way; it is underpinned by the feeling that others are having comparatively better and more frequent sex than we are (Burnell et al., 2019). Therefore, it is proposed that the misperception of promiscuity norms may increase levels of sexual FOMO. To explain, if a woman (mis)perceives that having exciting and frequent sex is the norm among her social group, she may experience feelings of sexual FOMO. Furthermore, she may engage in more sex to conform to the (misperceived) normative standard (Riordan et al., 2015). Hence, it is suggested that experiencing sexual FOMO may mediate the relationship between misperceiving social norms with regard to sex, and engaging in more risky sexual behaviour among women specifically.

The reasoning outlined above leads to the following hypotheses:

#### **Hypotheses**

***Hypothesis 1:*** Sexual FOMO is a significant predictor of risky sexual behaviour among women.

**Hypothesis 2:** Norm misperception is a significant predictor of risky sexual behaviour among women.

**Hypothesis 3:** Sexual FOMO mediates the relationship between norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour among women.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were recruited via the online platform Prolific. Originally, 254 people responded however, 5 participants were excluded from analysis due to insufficient answering. Ultimately, 249 women, over the age of 18, living in the United Kingdom participated in this study ( $M_{age} = 32$ ,  $min = 18$ ,  $max = 74$ ,  $SD = 11.58$ , missing data,  $N=9$ ). With regard to nationality, 212 participants were from Britain and 37 participants were from outside of Britain (namely Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Kenya, Mexico, India, Nigeria, Poland, Vietnam, Greece, Croatia, The Netherlands, France, Spain, New Zealand, Cyprus, Portugal, the USA and Romania). Of the 249 participants, 9 women were homosexual, 197 were heterosexual, 34 were bisexual and 9 were other sexual orientations. Although a filter was intentionally used on Prolific to recruit single women, 7 of the participants still reported being in a relationship (2.8% of the total sample).

### **Materials**

#### *Demographics*

To begin, some demographic questions were asked. Specifically, participants were asked about their age, nationality, sexual orientation and relationship status (see Appendix A).

#### *General FOMO*

Next, a general FOMO scale created by Zhang et al. (2020) was used. This measure consisted of 9 items, for example, “*I feel anxious when I do not experience events/opportunities*” (see Appendix B). It was answered using a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). A higher score on the general FOMO scale indicated that participants had higher levels of fear of missing out in general. Reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha indicated that both the general personal FOMO and the general social FOMO subscales had excellent reliability (general personal FOMO,  $\alpha = .91$ ; general social FOMO,  $\alpha = .90$ ).

### *Sexual FOMO*

A sexual FOMO scale was then employed. This scale was developed partly by Nijhuis (2021, unpublished thesis). It consisted of 19 items, for example, “*I feel anxious that I do not experience having sex*” (see Appendix C). It was also answered using a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). A higher score on the sexual FOMO scale indicated that participants had higher levels of fear of missing out on sexual experiences. Reliability was calculated using Cronbach’s alpha and results indicated that both the sexual personal FOMO and sexual social FOMO subscales had good reliability (sexual personal FOMO,  $\alpha = .85$ ; sexual social FOMO,  $\alpha = .93$ ).

### *Norm misperception – hooking up*

Participants’ personal comfort with hooking up as well as their perceptions of other women’s comfort with hooking up was measured to assess norm misperception, specifically pluralistic ignorance. This measure was developed by Lambert et al. (2003) and included items like “*How comfortable do you think the average woman is with the amount of hooking up that goes on?*” (see Appendix D). Items were answered using a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Extremely uncomfortable) to 7 (Extremely comfortable). Higher scores on this scale indicated that participants were more comfortable, and thought that other women were more comfortable

with hooking up. Mean difference scores were calculated and used for statistical analyses (greater mean difference scores indicated greater levels of norm misperception among participants). Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha indicated that the norm misperception – hooking up scale had good reliability (personal comfort  $\alpha = .89$ , average woman's comfort  $\alpha = .87$ ).

### *Risky sexual behaviour*

Lastly, participation in risky sexual behaviour was measured using an 8 item scale created by Verweij et al. (2009). Items included questions like “*Have you had sex (sexual intercourse) with a person you met the same day?*” (see Appendix E). Items were answered using a dichotomous answer structure consisting of “Yes” and “No”. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha indicated that this scale had good reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

## **Design**

This study used a within subjects correlational design to analyse the relationship between sexual FOMO, norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour. Sexual FOMO and norm misperception were the independent variables and risky sexual behaviour was the dependent variable.

## **Procedure**

Once the questionnaire containing the different measures was put together using Qualtrics, the study was uploaded onto Prolific with a brief description. After at least 250 participants had completed the questionnaire, recruitment ceased and the study was taken off Prolific. At the beginning of the online questionnaire the participants were presented with an information sheet that provided them with some details of the study (see Appendix F). Notably, it was not explicitly reported that the study dealt with FOMO. However, it was highlighted that

the study was investigating “current dating behaviour”. After reading the information sheet, participants were directed to a consent form (see Appendix G). The questionnaire only began if participants gave their informed consent. However, if no consent was given the study came to an end. Those who agreed to participate were first asked some demographics questions. Next, the participants answered the general FOMO questionnaire and then the sexual FOMO questionnaire. Once these were completed the norm misperception questionnaire had to be filled out and finally participants were asked about their risky sexual behaviour with regard to the last six months of their life. After completion of the online questionnaire, the women were thanked for their time and participation.

## **Results**

### **Factor analysis**

Prior to conducting the main statistical analyses, a principal axis factor (exploratory) analysis was conducted on the sexual FOMO Scale using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28) predictive analytic software (SPSS). All 19 items of the sexual FOMO scale were included in this analysis and oblique rotation (direct oblimin) was used. Using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure on SPSS the sampling adequacy of the analysis was verified ( $KMO = .93$ ). The results showed that 2 factors had eigenvalues over 1 (Factor 1, eigenvalue = 9.16: Factor 2, eigenvalue = 1.68), together these factors explained 57.07% of the variance in the data. Items 7, 8 and 19 were excluded from all further analyses because they loaded onto a third factor that reportedly had an eigen value of lower than 1 (eigenvalue = .79). The pattern matrix indicated that the items that loaded onto factor 1 represented sexual personal FOMO and those that loaded onto factor 2 represented sexual social FOMO.

### **Regression analysis**

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted in the application Jamovi using sexual personal FOMO, sexual social FOMO and norm misperception as predictor variables, and risky sexual behaviour as the outcome variable. Results showed that the overall regression was statistically significant ( $R^2 = 0.15$ ,  $F(3, 245) = 16.1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Concludingly, 15.4% of the variance in risky sexual behaviour was accounted for by the three predictor variables collectively, namely sexual personal FOMO, sexual social FOMO and norm misperception.

**Hypothesis 1:** Sexual FOMO is a significant predictor of risky sexual behaviour among women.

The linear regression analysis more specifically revealed that sexual personal FOMO was a significant positive predictor of risky sexual behaviour ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.21$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ). These results indicated that when women experienced more sexual personal FOMO, they engaged in greater levels of risky sexual behaviour. Moreover, sexual social FOMO significantly negatively predicted risky sexual behaviour ( $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $t = -2.06$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ). Thereby showing that the more sexual social FOMO experienced by a woman, the less she partook in risky sexual behaviour. Overall, these results indicated support for the first Hypothesis of this study.

**Hypothesis 2:** Norm misperception is a significant predictor of risky sexual behaviour among women.

Furthermore, the regression analysis showed that norm misperception was a significant negative predictor of risky sexual behaviour ( $\beta = -0.34$ ,  $t = -5.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results showed that higher levels of norm misperception predicted lower levels of risky sexual behaviour among women, thereby showing support for Hypothesis 2.

**Hypothesis 3:** Sexual FOMO mediates the relationship between norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour among women.

Finally, two separate mediation analyses were conducted on Jamovi. Firstly, sexual personal FOMO was used as the mediator variable, norm misperception as the predictor

variable and risky sexual behaviour as the dependent variable. Results indicated that sexual personal FOMO did not mediate this relationship ( $\beta = -.013, z = -1.03, p = 0.30$ ). Next, sexual social FOMO was used as the mediator variable while norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour remained the predictor and outcome variables respectively. Similarly, sexual social FOMO did not mediate the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables ( $\beta = -.01, z = -.70, p = .48$ ). Thus, these results did not show any support for Hypothesis 3.

### **Exploratory analyses**

#### *Correlational analyses*

A Person correlation coefficient matrix was created using SPSS to get an overview of any correlational relationships that existed between risky sexual behaviour, norm misperception and FOMO (both general and sexual) (see Table 1). With regard to the hypotheses of this study, results indicated that sexual personal FOMO significantly positively correlated with sexual social FOMO ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ) and significantly negatively correlated with norm misperception ( $r = -.14, p = .02$ ). Further, norm misperception was found to be significantly negatively correlated with risky sexual behaviour ( $r = -.38, p < .001$ ). Other noteworthy correlations revealed that personal comfort with hooking up significantly positively correlated with risky sexual behaviour ( $r = .41, p < .001$ ). Oppositely, perceived comfort of average woman with hooking up was not significantly correlated with risky sexual behaviour ( $r = .03, p = .63$ ).

#### *Regression analyses*

Another, exploratory, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted in the application Jamovi using general personal FOMO, general social FOMO and norm misperception as predictor variables, and risky sexual behaviour as the outcome variable. Results showed that the overall regression was statistically significant ( $R^2 = 0.15, F(3, 245) = 15.1, p < .001$ ). But, general personal FOMO did not significantly predict risky sexual

behaviour ( $\beta = -0.02, t = -0.28, p = 0.78$ ). Further, general social FOMO did not significantly predict risky sexual behaviour either ( $\beta = 0.11, t = 1.64, p = 0.10$ ). To the contrary, norm misperception was a significant negative predictor of risky sexual behaviour ( $\beta = -0.39, t = -6.53, p < .001$ ). These results indicated that higher levels of norm misperception predicted lower levels of risky sexual behaviour among women. Concludingly, 14.6% of the variance in risky sexual behaviour can be accounted for by norm misperception alone, as general personal FOMO and general social FOMO were not significant predictors.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and Pearson correlation coefficients for all variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. General personal FOMO	4.323	1.427	1	.529**	.465**	.351**	.076	.175**	.115	-.092
2. General social FOMO	3.779	1.535		1	.341**	.479**	.092	.001	.044	.030
3. Sexual personal FOMO	3.374	1.141			1	.622**	.121	.212**	.092	-.143*
4. Sexual social FOMO	2.354	1.311				1	-.080	-.013	.100	.082
5. Risky sexual behaviour	1.73	2.217					1	.410**	.030	-.381**
6. Personal comfort with hooking up	4.595	1.584						1	.327**	-.751**
7. Perceived comfort of average women with hooking up	4.848	1.129							1	.378**
8. Norm misperception	.253	1.616								1

Note:  $N = 249$ . \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

## Discussion

### Review of the findings

The results of this study demonstrate support for Hypothesis 1. Sexual personal FOMO positively predicts risky sexual behaviour. However, sexual social FOMO on the other hand, negatively predicts risky sexual behaviour. Support is also found for the second Hypothesis in that norm misperception negatively predicts risky sexual behaviour. Finally, no such support is found for the third and last Hypothesis. That is, neither sexual social FOMO nor sexual personal FOMO mediates the relationship between norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour. This study adds to the research on FOMO by specifically examining sexual FOMO and its role in risky sexual behaviour. Exploratory analyses also reveal that neither general social, nor general personal FOMO, predicts risky sexual behaviour. Further, personal comfort with hooking up is positively correlated with risky sexual behaviour, however, perception of average woman's comfort with hooking up is not. To contextualise, all of the above mentioned results are found among women. Further, as this is a cross-sectional study, no causal

conclusions can be drawn from the results. The following interpretations of the findings are not conclusive, they are informed suggestions, based on previous theoretical and empirical research of related factors

### **Interpretation of results**

Referring to the first Hypothesis, the aforementioned differing links between sexual personal FOMO and sexual social FOMO, and risky sexual behaviour are interesting. Theoretically, one possible reason that sexual personal FOMO promotes risky sexual behaviour while sexual social FOMO does the opposite, could be due to the different variables that each of these sexual FOMO factors taps into. To begin, the sexual personal FOMO items of the questionnaire address how much an individual values sexual experiences. For example, item 10 “I try to convince myself the opportunity of having sex is not that important” or item 18 “I think ‘if only I had more sex’ a lot”. According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), values play a role in determining one’s actions because they influence behavioural beliefs and attitudes which affect intentions to behave (Ajzen, 1991). It is plausible to suggest that individuals who score highly on the sexual personal FOMO items in this study deeply value “the opportunity to have sex”. As such, this value may be a driving force behind engagement in sexual behaviour even when it is a risk to one’s physical or psychological health.

Furthermore, other sexual personal FOMO items address regret with regard to sexual behaviour. Anticipated regret of inaction, that is when one feels regretful for *not* acting on a behaviour, predicts intentions to behave over and above other variables of the TPB (Sandberg et al., 2016). Scoring highly on the following sexual personal FOMO items would indicate that an individual experiences feelings of inaction regret: item 9 “I feel regretful when missing the opportunity of having sex” and item 11 “I can’t stop thinking about missing the opportunity of having sex”. Thus, it is plausible to hypothesise that this inaction regret results in feelings of

anticipated inaction regret when opportunities for sexual experiences arise; thereby encouraging individuals to engage in sexual behaviours that may be risky to their health.

On the contrary, many of the sexual social FOMO items address feelings of social exclusion and social disconnection. For example, item 13 “I think my social groups view me as unimportant/prudish (when I miss opportunities of having sex)” and item 14 “I feel excluded by my social groups (when I miss experiences of having sex)”. These feelings of social exclusion are closely associated with social anxiety (Heeren & McNally, 2018). What’s more, social anxiety is frequently characterised by avoidant social behaviour. Hence, maybe people who feel greater levels of sexual social FOMO exhibit less risky sexual behaviour because they generally avoid sexual social situations as they find them to be anxiety inducing.

With regard to the second Hypothesis, results indicate that the greater the difference between how comfortable an individual considers themselves with hooking up and how comfortable they consider the average women is with hooking up, the less risky sexual behaviour that individual participates in. With previously published literature on norm misperception in mind, these results are perplexing. Generally, the greater the difference in norm misperception demonstrated by an individual, the more that individual tries to conform to said norm (Pariera, 2013). For example, this is in line with research showing that the more that men perceive their peers to approve of engaging in sexual behaviour, the greater their intentions are to engage in oral and vaginal sex (Milhausen et al., 2006). However, other research shows that women’s sexual behaviour is not influenced by their awareness of the sexual double standard; the more negative assessment of women, compared to men, for engaging in the same sexual behaviours (Lyons et al., 2011). Sexual behaviour is not typically viewed in public and perhaps this privacy makes it less sensitive to the influence of social norms, specifically among women (Pariera, 2013). A future study could use a longitudinal

design to determine the true nature of the relationship between norm misperception and engagement in risky sexual behaviour among women.

To break this finding down further, the exploratory results show that personal comfort with hooking up is significantly correlated with risky sexual behaviour. However, perception of the average women's comfort with hooking up is not. Like the divergent effects of sexual personal and sexual social FOMO on risky sexual behaviour, these results also suggest that personal preferences and considerations may encourage risky sexual behaviour whereas social considerations on the other hand, may not.

Furthermore, this study was carried out in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of writing 1 in 4 adults in the United Kingdom still report always or often maintaining social distancing when outside their home (Office for National Statistics, 2022). This study's data collection occurred roughly two months prior, and although over two years has passed since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the risks associated with catching this respiratory virus are likely still salient in people's minds (Schneider et al., 2021). Risk perception is a basic component of the human decision making process and it positively predicts citizens' compliance with public health behaviours (Williams et al., 2007; Zungu et al., 2016). Therefore, the context in which the data of this study was gathered may have had an indirect effect on its results. Perhaps women in the United Kingdom were refraining from engaging in much/any sexual behaviour as it was perceived as being too risky with regard to getting the Corona virus and falling ill. Support for this interpretation lies in recent research conducted in the United States showing that perceptions of risky sexual behaviour changed as a result of the pandemic. Many individuals expanded their perception of risky sexual behaviour during the pandemic to include having sex with someone who does not practice social distancing, or having sex with anyone at all (Bowling et al., 2022).

With regard to the third and final Hypothesis, it is worth mentioning that previous literature has examined whether norm misperception pertaining to risky sexual behaviour has any effect on sex-life satisfaction or sexual anxiety, two variables closely related to sexual FOMO. Stephenson and Sullivan (2009) find that promiscuity norm misperception is significantly negatively correlated with sex-life satisfaction and sexual anxiety. However, Pariera (2013) could not replicate this effect. Therefore, the lack of significance found for the mediating effect of sexual FOMO of the relationship between norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour in this study only adds to the diverging literature in this area. It is proposed that the experience sampling method (ESM) would be an effective approach for future studies to assess this relationship and determine whether it is in fact causal in nature.

### **Implications and limitations**

Primarily, it is proposed that more research should be conducted on the relationships between sexual FOMO, norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour as this area of study is still in its infancy. To the knowledge of the author, this is the second study to date that looks specifically at sexual FOMO and its hypothetically related variables. Longitudinal or experimental research should be conducted so that more causal links can be drawn - based on the cross-sectional nature of the associations found in this study - between sexual FOMO, norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour. If indeed future research supports the correlational findings of this study, sexual social FOMO and its related feelings could be employed in interventions as a tool to discourage women from engaging in risky sexual behaviour.

Further, exploratory findings reveal that neither general personal FOMO nor general social FOMO significantly predicts risky sexual behaviour. However, as discussed above, sexual personal FOMO positively predicts risky sexual behaviour and sexual social FOMO negatively predicts it. This pattern of results hints at the notion that general FOMO does not predict many different behaviours, but particular types of FOMO may predict specific

behaviours. Future research should take this into consideration and develop context specific FOMO scales, e.g. sexual FOMO, and use these scales to assess more specific empirical relationships involving FOMO.

Although this study is a worthy addition to social psychological research on sexual FOMO, it is not without its limitations. This study looked at the relationship between sexual FOMO, norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour on the basis that the former variables may lead to more sexual behaviour, in turn resulting in the possibility of more risky sexual behaviour (Pariera, 2013). In hindsight, perhaps this study should have measured sexual behaviour as well as risky sexual behaviour to determine whether more sexual behaviour is, in fact, a prerequisite of risky sexual behaviour. Moreover, this study may have benefited from controlling for a baseline level of sexual experiences to assess whether the amount of sex an individual is actually having affects level of sexual FOMO. It is logical that individuals who are having frequent sex that is satisfying them, will not feel that they are missing out, i.e. they will not experience sexual FOMO.

Another limitation of this study is the gender composition of its sample. It is generally agreed upon that, across all age groups, men are more risk averse than women (Van Leijenhorst et al., 2008). Similarly with regard to sex, men tend to engage in more risky behaviours like having multiple sexual partners, for example (Menon et al., 2016; Puente et al., 2011). Furthermore, men tend to feel more inaction regret rather than action regret with regard to sex, and the reverse is true for women (Roese et al. 2006). According to evolutionary psychology research, women regret casual sexual encounters more than men because of the evolutionary costs that these actions may incur, i.e. getting pregnant with someone who is not going to help with raising the child (Galperin et al., 2013). On the other hand, missing out on a sexual encounter with a female mate is evolutionary costly for men because they cannot pass on their genes. Hence men regret inaction with regard to sexual encounters more than women. As

discussed previously, inaction regret is associated with sexual FOMO, specifically sexual personal FOMO. Therefore, men should be included in future research as these findings from the evolutionary psychology regret literature suggest that risky sexual behaviour may be more prevalent in men than in women.

## **Conclusion**

Despite its limitations, this study is a unique and relevant addition to the current FOMO literature. Although preliminary in nature, the findings allude to three interesting theses. Firstly, sexual FOMO plays a significant, yet complex role in risky sexual behaviour among women. Specifically, it appears that the personal, individual considerations related to sexual FOMO encourage risky sexual behaviour whereas the social considerations of sexual FOMO discourage it. Secondly, promiscuity norm misperception may not promote more sexual behaviour after all, it may even discourage it. Thirdly, and finally, general FOMO may not predict many different behaviours, but context-specific behaviours may be predicted by specific types of FOMO. However, future studies are needed to replicate and validate these findings. Specifically, experimental and longitudinal research is encouraged so that more comprehensive, complex and possibly causal relationships can be determined between sexual FOMO, norm misperception and risky sexual behaviour.

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## Appendix A

### Demographics Questionnaire

What age are you?

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Nationality What nationality are you?

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What is your sexual orientation?

- Homosexual
- Heterosexual
- Bisexual
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Relationship Status What is your relationship status?

- Single
- In a relationship

## Appendix B

### General FOMO Scale

- Q1. I feel anxious when I do not experience events/opportunities.
- Q2. I believe I am falling behind compared with others when I miss events/opportunities.
- Q3. I feel anxious because I know something important or fun must happen when I miss events/opportunities.
- Q4. I feel sad if I am not capable of participating in events due to the constraints of other things.
- Q5. I feel regretful of missing events/opportunities.
- Q6. I think my social groups view me as unimportant when I miss events/opportunities.
- Q7. I think I do not fit in social groups when I miss events/opportunities.
- Q8. I think I am excluded by my social groups when I miss events/opportunities.
- Q9. I feel ignored or forgotten by my social groups when I miss events/opportunities.

## Appendix C

### Sexual FOMO Scale

- Q1. I feel sad about missing out on sexual experiences. (personal)
- Q2. I feel curious about information about sex. (personal)
- Q3. I feel anxious that I do not experience having sex. (personal)
- Q4. I have a sense of uncertainty if I don't know what sexual experiences I missed out on. (personal)
- Q5. I am dissatisfied about my current sex life after/when missing out on experiences of having sex. (personal)
- Q6. I feel motivated to make sure of catching up more sexual experiences. (personal)
- Q7. I believe I am falling behind on sexual experiences compared with others. (social)
- Q8. I fear that I don't have the sexual experiences everyone else has or I can't do what others are able to do. (social)
- Q9. I feel regretful when missing the opportunity of having sex. (personal)
- Q10. I try to convince myself the opportunity of having sex is not that important. (personal)
- Q11. I can't stop thinking about missing the opportunity of having sex. (personal)
- Q12. I feel jealous of my friend's sexual experiences. (social)
- Q13. I think my social groups view me as unimportant/prudish (when I miss opportunities of having sex). (social)
- Q14. I feel excluded by my social groups (when I miss experiences of having sex). (social)
- Q15. I think I do not fit in social groups (when I miss experiences of having sex). (social)
- Q16. I feel disconnected with my social groups (when I miss experiences of having sex). (social)
- Q17. I think I am excluded by my social groups (when I miss experiences of having sex). (social)
- Q18. I think "if only I had more sex" a lot. (personal)
- Q19. I find it easy to put unwanted thoughts about sex out of mind. (personal)

## Appendix D

### Hooking up Scale

- Q1. How comfortable are you with the amount of hooking up that goes on among your peers?
- Q2. How comfortable are you with engaging in the following activities during a hook up?
- Q2a. Petting above the waist?
- Q2b. Petting below the waist?
- Q2c. Oral sex?
- Q2d. Sexual Intercourse?
- Q3. How comfortable do you think the average woman is with the amount of hooking up that goes on?
- Q4. How comfortable do you think the average woman is with engaging in the following activities during a hook up?
- Q4a. Petting above the waist?
- Q4b. Petting below the waist?
- Q4c. Oral sex?
- Q4d. Sexual intercourse?
- Q5. Oral sex?
- Q6. Do you perceive the norm (among women) with regard to comfortableness with hooking up to be more or less conservative than your ideal?

## Appendix E

### Risky Sexual Behaviour Scale

- Q1. Have you had sex (sexual intercourse) with a person you met the same day?
- Q2. Have you got pregnant by someone whom you were not married to?
- Q3. Have you had sex after having a lot to drink?
- Q4. Have you had sex without birth control even though you did not want to get pregnant?
- Q5. Have you had sexual intercourse without a condom with someone other than your regular partner?
- Q6. If you had a steady dating partner (or wife/husband), have you had sex with someone besides that partner?
- Q7. Have you had sex with more than one person in a 24-h period?
- Q8. Have you had any sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, genital herpes, chlamydia, genital warts, NSU (or any other sexually transmitted disease)?

## Appendix F

### Information Sheet

#### Why do I receive this information?

You are invited to participate in the research “**Your current dating behavior**”. This information is to inform you about what you can expect from this specific study. The topics of research are your perception of the general norms when it comes to dating and risky sexual behaviour. The research will be conducted between 15-02-2022 and 01-05-2022. This research plan has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen. This research is conducted by Kai Epstude (University of Groningen) and Rachel Boyce (University of Groningen).

#### Do I have to participate in this research?

Participation in the research is completely voluntary. However, your informed consent is necessary before participation. Therefore, we ask you to please read this information sheet carefully. If anything is unclear, or you wish to ask questions about the research, please contact [k.epstude@rug.nl](mailto:k.epstude@rug.nl) before agreeing to participate. If you decide that you do not wish to participate, you do not need to explain why, and there will be no negative consequences for you. You have this right to withdraw from the study at all times, including after you have consented to participate in the research.

#### Why this research?

The topic of the research is how FoMO and norm misperception may be related to risky sexual behaviour among women.

#### What do we ask of you during the research?

After agreeing to the requirements of the study and signing the informed consent form, you will be directed to an online questionnaire. There are no wrong answers, and you should not have to think about any negative consequences for any of your answers, as your answers will be anonymous. Please answer the questions in the questionnaire based on your own opinion/experience. The research will take around 10 minutes of your time. You will be compensated via Prolific.

#### What are the consequences of participation?

As a participant in this study, you will be compensated via Prolific. It is acknowledged that risky sexual behaviour may be a sensitive and emotionally distressing topic for some individuals. This study will ask you questions on this topic. If you feel that this is not something you would like to be asked about, please do not participate in this study.

#### How will we treat your data?

Your data will be collected from the answers you give to the questions on the questionnaire. Your answers cannot be linked to any personal information. We will have no direct access to directly identifying information (names, email addresses) and we will ensure your privacy by keeping the data confidential. The only personal information that will be asked for during

data collection are age, nationality, sexuality and relationship status. We are not able to identify individual participants based on that, given that we have no access to information like names and emails for participants in the Prolific participant pool.

**What else do you need to know?**

You may ask any questions about the research: now, during the research, and after the end of the research. You can do so by emailing ([k.epstude@rug.nl](mailto:k.epstude@rug.nl)).

Do you have questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant? For this you may also contact the Ethics Committee of the University of Groningen: [ecp@rug.nl](mailto:ecp@rug.nl).

Do you have questions or concerns regarding your privacy, or regarding the handling of your personal data? For this you may also contact the Data Protection Officer of the University of Groningen: [privacy@rug.nl](mailto:privacy@rug.nl).

As a research participant you have the right to a copy of this research information.

## Appendix G

### Consent Form

#### INFORMED CONSENT

(For participants aged 18 years or older)

An investigation into perceived social norms and sexual risk taking among women.

I have read the information about the research. I have had enough opportunity to ask questions about it. I understand what the research is about, what is being asked of me, which consequences participation can have, how my data will be handled, and what my rights as a participant are. I understand that participation in the research is voluntary. I myself choose to participate. I can stop participating at any moment. If I stop, I do not need to explain why. Stopping will have no negative consequences for me. By proceeding to the next page, I acknowledge that I have read the information and consent to participate in the study.

Yes, I give my consent and wish to proceed.