Moral Judgments of Sexual Behavior and Its Influence on Perceptions of Social Status

Hannah E. Kim

The University of Texas at Austin

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Department of Psychology, The University of Texas at Austin

Faculty Advisor: James P. Curley, PhD

Graduate Student Mentors: Köll R. Rada, BS; Rebecka K. Hahnel-Peeters, PhD

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Abstract

Moral judgments play a central role in shaping how people perceive others' social status (Wojciszke, 2015), yet little is known about how judgments of sexual behavior specifically influence these perceptions. Status shapes access to resources, social influence, and mating opportunities, and understanding how sexual morality guides status judgments is crucial for explaining how social hierarchies form and operate. A total of 100 participants (69 women, 31 men; M_{age} = 20.3) completed an online survey assessing their sociosexual orientation (SOI), relationship preferences, and social status perceptions of others. Total SOI scores differed by sex, with men reporting higher scores than women (X^2 = 9.43, $p < .01$). Individuals who reported a stronger preference for short-term or casual relationships tended to view targets engaging in casual sexual behavior as having higher social status, whereas individuals who favored long-term or committed relationships perceived the same behavior as lowering a person's status. These patterns were moderated by sex, with women showing stricter evaluations of sexual behavior in long-term contexts than men(t(44.91) = -2.56, p = 0.01). Overall, findings suggest that moral judgments of sexual behavior extend beyond character assessment and play a meaningful role in determining where individuals are placed within social hierarchies.

Keywords: Sexual strategies, moral judgments, social status, perception

Moral Judgments of Sexual Behavior and Its Influence on Perceptions of Social Status

Social status, an individual's position within a hierarchy and the extent to which they receive respect, influence, and access to resources, plays a key role in shaping human behavior (Anderson et al., 2015). High-status individuals often gain advantages such as increased cooperation, better access to resources, and greater reproductive opportunities (Koski et al., 2015). In contrast, low-status individuals face challenges and may adopt prosocial behaviors to navigate hierarchies (Koski et al., 2015). Social status reflects not only one's abilities or resources but also the perceptions of others within a group, which can drive competition (Cheng et al., 2013). Importantly, status is shaped by cultural and moral norms, particularly in domains of sexual behavior, where societal expectations heavily influence judgments of individuals (Anderson et al., 2015).

The human status criteria framework (Buss et al. 2020) defines status as a hierarchical rank based on respect, admiration, and reputational regard, all of which are directly influenced by moral character. For example, individuals perceived as intelligent, courageous, articulate, and hard-working, tend to receive higher reputational standing. A study examining status-enhancing qualities found that being well-spoken, attending a prestigious university, and demonstrating bravery in dangerous situations were among the most status-increasing traits (Durkee et al., 2020). In this sense, moral character directly contributes to how people are evaluated within hierarchies, signaling trustworthiness and reliability to others.

Morality refers to socially constructed principles that distinguish right from wrong, guiding acceptable behavior within a given society (Turiel, 1983). Moral judgments shape how individuals are perceived, trusted, and integrated into social groups (Fiske, 2010). For instance,

behaviors considered morally virtuous often increase social prestige, while behaviors viewed as deviant or promiscuous can reduce status (Cheng et al., 2013). Sexual behavior represents one such domain, in which moral evaluation exerts a particularly strong influence on perceptions of social standing.

Sexual morality is defined as judgments of approbation or condemnation of sexual conduct (Asao et al., 2023). Sexual behavior can be characterized in terms of short-term and long-term mating strategies. Short-term mating involves casual, low-commitment sexual interactions, whereas long-term mating behavior involves pursuing stable, committed relationships with mutual investment (Baranowski & Hecht, 2015). Cultural norms often shape moral evaluations of these behaviors. For example, women who engage in short-term sexual behavior tend to receive harsher moral judgments in societies that prioritize monogamy and sexual restraint, whereas men may receive more tolerance or even approval (Koski et al., 2015; Stewart-Williams et al., 2017). In contrast, individuals pursuing long-term mating behaviors are often viewed favorably because their actions align with societal views of trustworthiness, responsibility, and commitment (Gouda-Vossos et al., 2016). Physical attractiveness can mitigate negative moral evaluation, allowing some individuals to preserve social standing despite engaging in less socially accepted sexual behaviors. Despite extensive research on the determinants of human status (Anderson et al., 2015), the exact degree to which moral judgments of sexual behavior shape the perception of status remains unclear.

This study examined how moral judgments about various sexual behaviors influence perceptions of an individual's social status using a cross-sectional survey design. Prior work on sexual morality and human status allocation suggests that an individual's sexual behavior, adherence to social norms, and cultural values may play a role in shaping how individuals are

perceived in social hierarchies (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Asao et al., 2023). Building on these findings, the current study explored how specific sexual behaviors inform judgments of both dominance and prestige, which represent two distinct yet complementary pathways to social status. It was anticipated that individuals with a higher SOI (i.e. short-term mating orientation) would assign higher social status to casual sexual behaviors. In contrast, those with a lower SOI (i.e., long-term mating orientation) would view the same behaviors as status-reducing. Additionally, status perceptions were expected to vary as a function of biological sex. Exploratory analyses examined the potential moderating effects of demographic factors such as age, partner preferences, and relationship experience. The following section reviews existing research on status development, sexual strategies, sexual morality, and the factors shaping social perceptions to contextualize these hypotheses.

Status and Its Importance to Our Species

In humans, higher status is linked to greater access to material resources (e.g., quality housing, luxury goods), stronger social support (e.g., friends or mentors who provide advice), better healthcare (e.g., private health insurance, specialized medical treatments), and reduced vulnerability during times of illness or need (e.g., assistance from social networks during crises). An individual with high status is therefore often perceived as confident, influential, and socially well-connected. Status can also enhance one's perceived value as a social or romantic partner, providing both practical and reputational benefits. Specifically, a high-status individual often exhibits commanding non-verbal behavior (e.g., maintaining eye contact), receives deference from others (e.g., speaking without interruption), and possesses a strong reputation that suggests competency and control over valuable resources (e..g, being known as a skilled negotiator) (Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

These material, social, and reputational advantages associated with high status extend beyond external benefits to include physical health, psychological well-being, and relationship satisfaction. Individuals occupying higher positions within social hierarchies often experience more rewarding social interactions, recover more quickly from stressors, and have greater access to social networks and resources, all of which contribute to elevated well-being (Anderson et al., 2015; Koski et al., 2015; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In contrast, lower-status individuals frequently face chronic stress, lower social influence, and increased vulnerability to anxiety and depressive symptoms, compounding the negative effects of subordination on psychological functioning (Sapolsky, 2005; Fiske, 2010). Status also shapes relational outcomes: high-status individuals are more likely to form and maintain stable, supportive friendships and romantic relationships, benefit from deference and positive regard from peers, and reciprocity within these connections (Buss et al., 2020; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Conversely, lower-status individuals may experience social exclusion, limited partner responsiveness, and less influence within their relationships, which can compromise relational quality and stability (White et al., 1976; Barclay & Willer, 2007). These findings highlight that social status is a key factor shaping both psychological well-being and the quality of a person's relationships.

The benefits of high status for well-being and relationships are closely tied to the resources that create and sustain influence, particularly socio-economic status. Cross-culturally, women tend to prefer men with greater financial stability and prospects (Buss, 1989). Socio-economic status (SES) is often considered a significant predictor of social status in humans (Sapolsky, 2004) because it reflects an individual's control over material and social resources (e.g., wealth, education, occupational prestige), which are the very means by which high status is displayed and maintained in most modern hierarchies. Thus, high SES provides a

direct pathway to earning the respect, admiration, and deference that constitute social status. Broadly, individuals can achieve status through two main routes: dominance and prestige.

Dominance and Prestige as Strategies for Status Attainment

Although humans have dominance hierarchies, routes to status also heavily rely on social traits beyond physical dominance, such as intelligence, kindness, and industriousness (i.e., the tendency to work diligently). Human social dynamics are shaped by both external factors (e.g., cultural norms, peer groups), and internal factors (e.g., personal experiences, identity, social roles) (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). For example, if one were placed in a different country, they might adapt to local cultural norms while retaining internal characteristics such as education level, gender, or personal history. Because status emerges from both social influence and personal attributes, humans achieve it through two primary pathways: dominance and prestige (Cheng et al., 2020).

Dominance relies on overt displays of power and control, often involving aggression. Dominant individuals are typically perceived as capable of defending resources and territory, making them attractive as leaders or short-term mates (Cheng et al. 2013, 2020). A meta-analysis of 96 studies (n = 177,044) found that men's strength and muscularity were the strongest predictors of mating success (Lidborg et al., 2022). This dominance pathway is associated with elevated testosterone levels, which are linked to aggression, a greater desire for short-term mating strategies and reduced paternal investment, highlighting a bidirectional relationship between sexual behavior and biology (Carré et al., 2023).

Prestige, in contrast, is signaled through behaviors conveying competence, skill, and knowledge. It is earned through respect and expressed via approachable demeanor, friendly facial expressions, and open posture (Witkower et al., 2020). Prestigious individuals are admired for

valuable, prosocial contributions to the group, such as altruism, superior problem-solving, and social intelligence, which elicit voluntary deference and cooperation. Empirical work shows that altruistic behavior itself can enhance prestige, as individuals who incur costs to benefit others gain admiration and elevated social standing (Barclay & Willer, 2007). Unlike dominance, which can coerce compliance through fear, prestige encourages voluntary influence because lower-status individuals genuinely value the prestigious person's abilities (Witkower et al., 2020).

Fluctuations in Status Dynamics

Social hierarchies are dynamic and can shift over time as people interact and circumstances change (Qu et al., 2017). Friendships and social networks, for example, can fluctuate even within a single peer group. In a college fraternity, researchers found that over just 15 weeks, individuals formed smaller, tighter social networks within the larger organization. Similar patterns have also been observed in other social contexts, including classrooms, workplace teams, and community organizations, where relationships reorganize as people spend more time together and gravitate toward preferred partners (White et al., 1976). Importantly, the factors that influence status and social dynamics can differ across domains: a student admired for being smart in class may not stand out on a sports team, and someone popular in high school might lose influence after moving to a new city. Across cultures, traits such as socio-economic status, intelligence, physical appearance, and kindness contribute to social standing and can even influence mate choice (Gouda-Vossos et al., 2019).

It's important to note that both men and women engage in competition to improve their mating opportunities and social standing. Intersexual competition refers to strategies used to attract potential mates, while intrasexual competition involves competing with members of the

same sex for access to those mates (Boxer et al., 2013). Men typically compete through aggression and physical dominance, whereas women more often use reputational strategies, such as social exclusion (Benenson et al., 2003, 2009, 2013). These patterns reflect the influence of cultural and social factors on how individuals prioritize different qualities. Similarly, moral judgments surrounding sexual behavior also play a significant role in determining an individual's social ranking (Asao et al., 2023).

The Impact of Moral Judgments on Sexual Behavior

Several frameworks have been proposed to understand moral reasoning (Haidt et al., 2001; Curry, 2016). Given the focus on sexual morality and status perceptions, this study draws on the Reproductive Self-Interest Model of Morality (RSIMM; Weeden & Kurzban, 2013). The Reproductive Self-Interest Model of Morality (RSIMM) model explains how sexual morality impacts the perceived status of others by linking moral judgments to personal relationship goals (Weeden & Kurzban, 2013). While the original model was developed from an evolutionary perspective, here it is applied in a proximate framework, focusing on the immediate social and psychological mechanisms that shape moral judgments. According to the RSIMM, individuals are more likely to morally condemn behaviors that conflict with their own sexual strategies, whether they prioritize long-term or short-term commitments (Hahnel-Peeters et al., 2023). For example, individuals who value exclusive, long-term relationships are likely to perceive individuals engaging in promiscuous or sexually deviant behaviors as less moral, because such actions conflict with one's own relationship goals and values. As a result, these individuals are more likely to support moral norms that discourage casual sex. On the other hand, individuals who favor short-term relationships may not view permissive sexual behaviors as morally problematic. In fact, they may even perceive others who engage in these behaviors as morally

virtuous, since such actions align with their own sexual strategies. By contrast, they may judge individuals who pursue sexually committed, long-term relationships less harshly, because these behaviors do not conflict with their own moral standards (Weeden & Kurzban, 2013).

Sexual Morality's Effects on Perceiving Social Status

Although moral judgements in general have been well-explored in the contexts of social status, there is limited research on the impact of sexual morality. Violations of sexual norms are frequently associated with reputational damage (Piazza & Sousa, 2014). In a survey study, participants ranked behaviors such as intoxicated sexual activity among the traits most likely to decrease social status, alongside laziness or irresponsibility (Durkee et al. 2020). Such judgments can lead to social consequences, including exclusion, reduced trust, and fewer leadership opportunities (Goodwin et al., 2014; Tetlock et al., 2000). The degree of status decline, however, depends on societal norms and cultural values (Piazza & Sousa, 2014).

As a moral domain, sexual morality remains relatively underexplored and is generally assessed using broad measures of attitudes towards sexual behavior. The Sexual Morality Inventory (SMI), in contrast, offers a comprehensive tool (Asao et al., 2023). The initial validation of the inventory explored moral judgments on sexual behavior in seven distinct factors of sexual behavior, finding notable sex differences in the evaluation of behaviors tied to short-term mating strategies. Two key factors from the SMI that are particularly relevant to this study include long-term sex and short-term sex.

Long-term mating behaviors involve committed, exclusive relationships focused on building stable partnerships over time. People who pursue these strategies are viewed positively because their actions align with societal values, prioritizing emotional investment and

trustworthiness, and often gain higher social status as a result (Rusbult, 1980; Nason et al., 2021).

Short-term sexual behaviors, such as casual or uncommitted sexual encounters (e.g., one-night stands, “hookups”), are often viewed negatively in cultures that value commitment and stability (Baranowski & Hecht, 2015). As a result, individuals engaging in short-term sex might experience a decline in social status, being seen as irresponsible or morally questionable, particularly by those pursuing long-term sexual strategies (Piazza & Sousa, 2014).

Conclusion

The present study aims to examine how short-term and long-term mating orientations shape perceptions of social status in morally relevant sexual contexts. Prior research has shown that social status emerges from dominance, prestige, moral evaluations, and personal traits such as intelligence, attractiveness, and prosociality (Anderson et al., 2015; Barclay & Willer, 2007; Cheng, 2020; Lidborg et al., 2022; Witkower et al., 2020). Moral judgments of sexual behavior can dramatically influence social standing, determining trust, admiration, and reputational value (Asao et al., 2023; Durkee et al., 2020; Piazza & Sousa, 2014; Weeden & Kurzban, 2013). While prior studies have examined general patterns of sexual morality, few have explored how these judgments interact with individual mating strategies. By assessing sociosexual orientation and status perceptions, this study investigates how personal relationship goals drive social evaluation. Identifying these links will reveal how sexual behavior and moral judgment shape hierarchies and social influence.

Method

Study Design Overview

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine how mating orientation and sexual attitudes shape perceptions of social status in response to morally charged sexual behaviors. 99 undergraduate participants were recruited from The University of Texas at Austin. Participants completed self-report questionnaires assessing demographics (Basic Demographic Questionnaire), attitudes towards casual sex (Sociosexual Orientation Inventory-Revised), and social status perceptions towards sexual scenarios (Status Perceptions Questionnaire).

It was hypothesized that individuals with a short-term mating orientation would attribute higher social status to individuals who engage in casual or promiscuous sexual behaviors. Furthermore, sexual attitudes were predicted to moderate this relationship, such that participants with more permissive attitudes would assign higher status to individuals engaging in morally charged sexual behaviors. Sex differences were also expected, with men anticipated to view emotionally charged sexual behaviors as less harmful to an individual's social status than women.

Participants

Undergraduate students from The University of Texas at Austin (n = 100) were recruited through a combination of online social media announcements, physical flyers posted in common campus areas, and referrals from other participants. To be eligible, participants had to be at least 18 years old, currently enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, and fluent in English. The study was administered via Qualtrics, and individuals who failed embedded attention checks or did not meet inclusion criteria were excluded. Partial responses were retained for analysis where possible.

Materials and Measures

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire to assess variables such as sex, age, race/ethnicity, political orientation, religious affiliation, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and sexual frequency. Example items include, "What is your biological sex?", "Which of these best describes your sexual orientation?" and statements like "I am open to both short-term or long-term relationships." to which participants indicated their level of agreement. These demographic variables are not part of the study's primary hypotheses but were included for potential exploratory analyses and to aid in sample description and contextualization. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R)

Sociosexual orientation was assessed using the Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), a 9-item measure designed to evaluate individual differences in willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual activity. The SOI-R covers three domains: behavior (e.g., number of sexual partners in the past 12 months), attitudes (e.g., agreement with statements such as "I can imagine myself being comfortable with casual sex"), and desires (e.g., frequency of sexual fantasies about casual sexual encounters). Participants responded using a 9-point Likert scale or numerical counts depending on the item, with higher scores indicating a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation. For this study, the three domain scores were summed to create a total sociosexual orientation score. The SOI-R has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.80–0.88$) and test-retest reliability across domains (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008).

Status Perceptions Questionnaire

A 38-item self-report questionnaire was created by adapting items from the Sexual Morality Inventory (SMI; Asao et al., 2023), a multidimensional measure assessing moral evaluations and attitudes towards a range of sexual behaviors, including short-term and long-term sex, same sex-sexuality, sexual infidelity, incest, sexual coercion, and paraphilic behaviors. Participants rated the perceived social status of individuals engaging in each behavior using a 7-point Likert scale. Response options were coded numerically from -3 ("Greatly decreases their status") to +3 ("Greatly increases their status"), where negative values indicated perceived decreases in social status and positive values indicated perceived increases in social status. For all scenarios, participants were instructed:

> *"For each item below, please indicate how your opinion about a person's social status would change if they performed this behavior."*

Example items include: "While involved in a steady relationship, having an emotional affair with someone else," "Having a reputation as an easily-accessible sexual partner," "Passionately kissing someone of the same sex," and "Drugging a person in order to have sex with them."

Total scores were calculated by summing the numerical ratings across all 38 items. Higher total scores indicated more permissive attitudes (viewing sexual behaviors as status-enhancing or neutral), while lower scores indicated less permissive attitudes (viewing sexual behaviors as status-diminishing). These total scores were used as the primary index of sexual permissiveness in all subsequent analyses.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from the undergraduate student population at The University of Texas at Austin. Upon accessing the study through Qualtrics, they first reviewed and signed an informed consent form, followed by additional screening and demographic questions to confirm eligibility based on the study's inclusion criteria.

Next, participants completed a series of validated self-report measures in the following order: the Basic Demographic Questionnaire, the Revised Sociosexual Orientation Questionnaire (SOI-R), and the Status Perceptions Questionnaire. Attention checks were embedded within the survey to ensure data quality and participant attentiveness. Upon completing the study, participants received a debriefing form explaining the study's purpose, key hypotheses, and relevant resources. Attention checks were embedded throughout the survey to ensure data quality and participant attentiveness (e.g., "As a quick check, please select 'Greatly decreases their status' below"). All responses were kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Statistical Analyses

All statistical analyses were conducted in RStudio (version 4.4.2). SOI-R scores were computed following established scoring procedures, including one reverse-scored item (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Participants were categorized into low, medium, and high SOI groups based on the mean ± one standard deviation. Due to non-normal distributions, Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to examine differences among SOI groups, with Holm-Adjusted Dunn's post-hoc tests for pairwise comparisons. Mann-Whitney U tests were employed for analyses involving biological sex as a predictor. All analyses used complete cases, and all tests were two-tailed with a significance level of $\alpha = .05$. Exploratory analyses utilized rank regression models based on

principal component clusters due to the lack of normality in the outcome variables (Chen et al., 2014).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participant Characteristics

The analytic sample included 100 participants, of whom 69 were female and 31 were male. The majority of participants were single (55% of both females and males), followed by those in a serious relationship with one person (39% of females, 35% of males). A smaller proportion reported dating one person non-exclusively (4.3% of females, 3.2% of males) or dating multiple people casually (1.4% of females, 6.5% of males).

Regarding mating strategy preferences, the majority of female participants (67%) preferred long-term committed relationships, while male participants were more evenly distributed between preferring long-term relationships (48%) and being open to both short-term or long-term relationships (45%). A small number of participants from both sexes reported currently not being interested in romantic or sexual relationships (1.4% of females, 3.2% of males) or preferring short-term/casual relationships (1.4% of females, 3.2% of males).

Based on SOI scores, participants were classified into three groups: medium SOI (68% of females, 52% of males), low SOI (22% of females, 13% of males), and high SOI (10% of females, 35% of males). SOI classification differed by sex, with a higher proportion of male participants categorized as high SOI (35%) compared to female participants (10%; see Table 4 for the complete distribution).

Participant ages ranged from 17 to 28 years. The most common age (modal age) was 19 years, reported by 38% of female participants and 19% of male participants. The majority of the

sample (96%) fell between 18 and 21 years of age. One female participant was 17 years old, and one male participant was 28 years old. Descriptive statistics for all demographic variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (N = 100)

Variable	Female	Male
	N = 69	N = 31
Relationship Status		
Dating multiple people casually	1 (1.4%)	2 (6.5%)
Dating one person, but not committed to that person	3 (4.3%)	1 (3.2%)
In a serious relationship with one person	27 (39%)	11 (35%)
Single	38 (55%)	17 (55%)
Mating strategy		
I am not currently interested in romantic or sexual relationships	1 (1.4%)	1 (3.2%)
I am open to both short-term or long-term relationships	17 (25%)	14 (45%)
I am unsure / still figuring it out	4 (5.8%)	0 (0%)
I prefer long-term committed relationships (not seeking short-term)	46 (67%)	15 (48%)
I prefer short-term / casual relationships (not seeking long-term)	1 (1.4%)	1 (3.2%)

SOI		
High	7 (10%)	11 (35%)
Low	15 (22%)	4 (13%)
Medium	47 (68%)	16 (52%)
Age		
17	1 (1.4%)	0 (0%)
18	7 (10%)	5 (16%)
19	26 (38%)	6 (19%)
20	13 (19%)	10 (32%)
21	19 (28%)	6 (19%)
22	3 (4.3%)	3 (9.7%)
28	0 (0%)	1 (3.2%)

Note. All measures were based on participants' self-reported behaviors and preferences. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Status Perceptions on Sexual Scenarios

SOI Group Differences

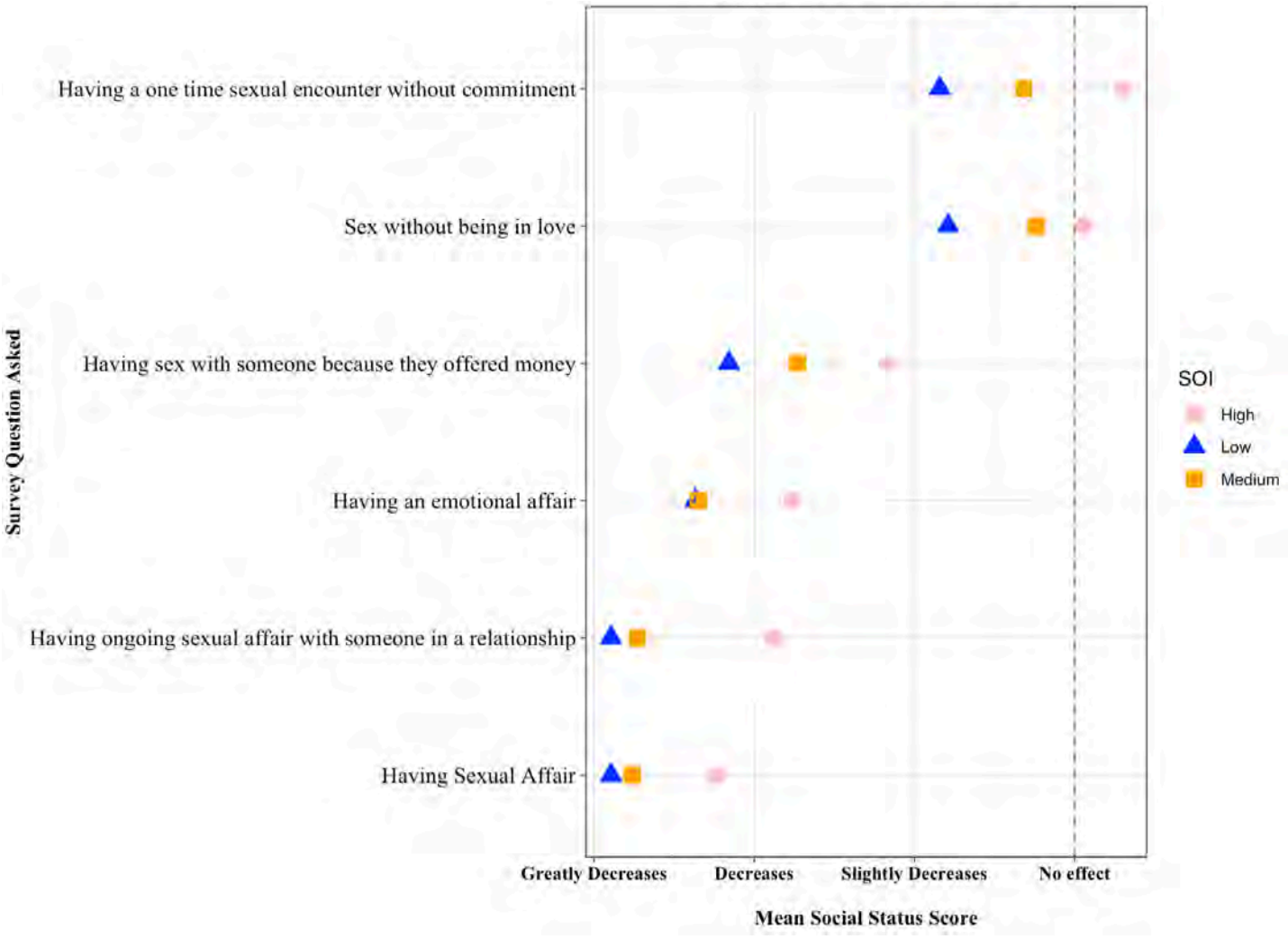
Of the 38 items from the Status Perceptions Questionnaire, six demonstrated statistically significant differences across SOI groups. Three items pertained to infidelity behaviors, both sexual and emotional: 'Having an ongoing sexual affair with someone who is already in a steady relationship with someone else' ($H = 14.20$, $p < .001$), "While involved in a steady relationship, having an emotional affair with someone else" ($H = 6.67$, $p < .04$), and "While involved in a steady relationship, having a sexual affair with someone else" ($H = 13.57$, $p = .001$). The remaining three items addressed casual sexual behavior: "Having sex with someone because they offered to pay money" ($H = 9.07$, $p = .01$), "Having sex with someone without being in love with

them" (H = 12.81, p = .002), and "Having a one-time sexual encounter without commitment" (H = 11.73, p = .002). See Table 3 for the full descriptive statistics.

Across all six items, participants with higher SOI scores perceived these behaviors as significantly less damaging to social status compared to those with medium and low SOI scores. Dunn's post-hoc pairwise comparisons revealed a consistent pattern: high SOI participants differed significantly from low SOI participants on all six items ($p < .001$ for all comparisons), from medium SOI participants on four of the six items, and low SOI participants differed from medium SOI participants on one item (p = .01) (See Table 3 for full descriptive statistics).

Figure 1

SOI Impacts on Social Status Perceptions



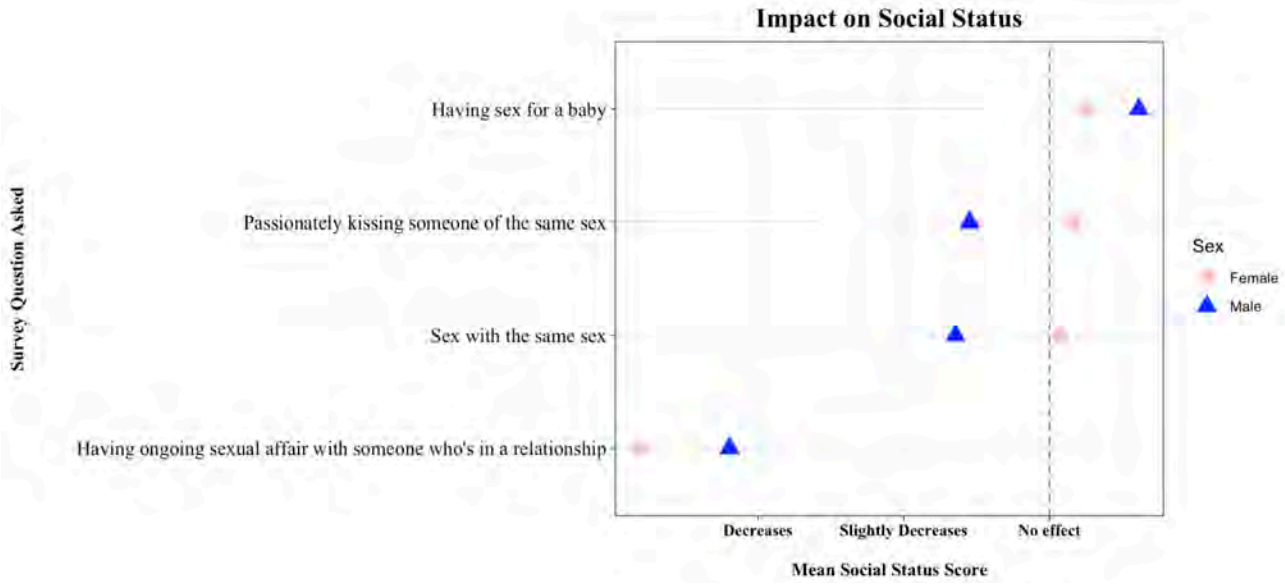
Note. Mean scores for each question range from -3 to +3, reflecting their overall impact on social status. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Sex Differences

Four items from the Status Perceptions Questionnaire differed significantly by biological sex. Two items were perceived as more damaging to social status by males than females: "Passionately kissing someone of the same sex" ($W = 1387$, $p < .001$) and "Sex with the same sex" ($W = 1430$, $p < .001$). Conversely, two items were perceived as more damaging by females than males: "Having sex for a baby" ($W = 838$, $p < .05$) and "Having an ongoing sexual affair with someone who is already in a steady relationship with someone else" ($W = 767$, $p < .01$). While both sexes viewed these behaviors as damaging to social status, males rated the impact of the ongoing affair as less severe compared to females.

Figure 2

Sex Differences on Social Status Perceptions



Note: Mean scores for each question range from -3 to +3, reflecting their overall impact on social status.

Exploratory Analyses

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted to examine the underlying structure of the questionnaire items and reduce dimensionality in the dataset. Given that the survey included a diverse set of morally and socially charged sexual scenarios, PCA was an appropriate data-driven method to identify patterns in participants' responses. This procedure summarized shared variance among items and allowed for the identification of latent constructs within the survey. Three clusters emerged, each reflecting distinct attitudes related to social status and mating strategies (see Table 4 for a complete list of behaviors in each cluster).

To further analyze these clusters, rank-based regression models were performed. Items loading onto the same cluster were summed to create a total cluster score. Biological sex and participants' SOI scores were entered as predictors. Because the cluster scores exhibited non-normal distributions, rank regression was selected as a robust alternative to ordinary linear modeling (Chen et al., 2014), consistent with the logic of non-parametric tests such as the Kruskal–Wallis and Mann–Whitney U tests.

Cluster 1: Morally and Socially Condemned Behaviors

Cluster 1 included 13 items, including behaviors such as "Having sex with a dead body," "Having sex with one's cousin," and "Having sex with an animal." Analyses revealed a significant interaction effect between sex and total SOI score, with males with higher SOI scores viewing this cluster as less damaging to social status compared to females ($\beta = 0.13$, $p = .02$). Total SOI score was marginally significant ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = .05$), and biological sex alone was not significant ($\beta = -2.73$, $p = .15$).

***Cluster 2:** Nontraditional or Norm-Violating Behaviors*

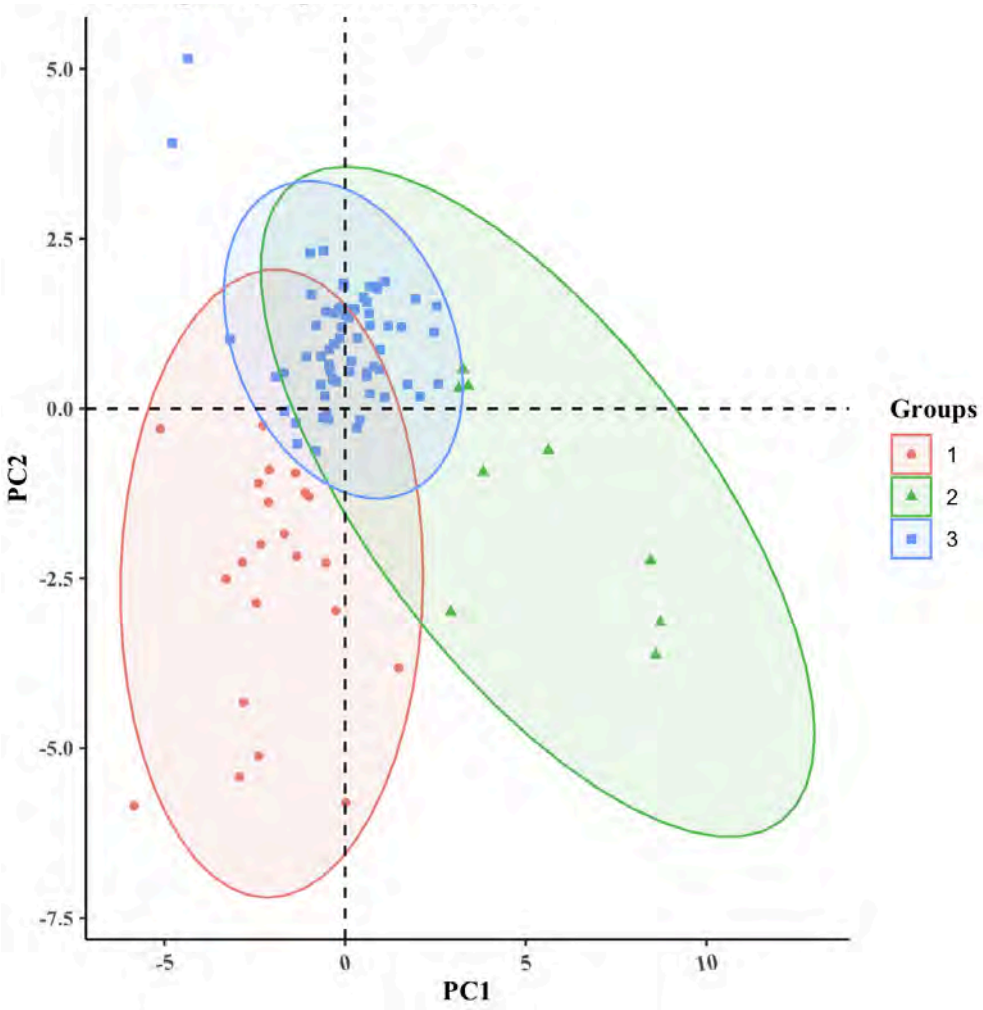
Cluster 2 also included 13 items, such as "Having sex with someone of the same sex," "Having sex with someone of a different ethnic group," and "Having a reputation as an easily-accessible sexual partner." Significant results were found for biological sex ($\beta = -5.84$, $p = .004$), total SOI score ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = .02$), and the interaction between sex and SOI ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = .04$). Males viewed these behaviors as more damaging to social status compared to females, individuals with higher SOI scores viewed these behaviors as less damaging, and the interaction indicated that as males' SOI increased, they perceived these behaviors as increasingly less damaging.

***Cluster 3:** Committed, Prosocial Behaviors*

Cluster 3 included six items, including "Making sure one's romantic partner is sexually satisfied," "Remaining sexually faithful to one's romantic partner," and "Telling one's romantic partner 'I love you' during sex." No significant effects were found for biological sex ($\beta = 2.83$, $p = .30$), total SOI score ($\beta = 0.004$, $p = .93$), or their interaction ($\beta = -0.08$, $p = .32$). Both males and females, regardless of SOI score, rated these behaviors as positively impacting social status.

Figure 3

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) on Three Clusters



Note. Clusters are summarized in Table 4, which lists each behavior and the corresponding cluster label.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how morally charged sexual behaviors influence perceptions of social status, and specifically, how these perceptions vary as a function of biological sex and sociosexual orientation. The SOI measure allowed for examination of whether individual differences in sociosexual orientation predict how participants evaluate the social status consequences of various sexual behaviors. Using a cross-sectional survey design, participants self-reported the extent to which each of 38 sexual scenarios would increase or decrease an individual's social status. Meaningful differences emerged in how participants perceived the status implications of specific behaviors. Principal component analysis (PCA) reduced the dimensionality of these responses and identified three highly relevant behavioral clusters for analysis: Morally and Socially Condemned Behaviors, Nontraditional / Norm-Violating Behaviors, and Prosocial, Committed Behaviors.

High SOI Individuals Perceive Infidelity as Less Status-Damaging

Individuals with high SOI scores perceived acts of infidelity (both sexual and emotional) as significantly less damaging to social status compared to medium and low SOI individuals. Although participants across all SOI groups rated infidelity behaviors as negatively impacting social status, the extent of this perceived damage differed substantially. This pattern aligns with the behavioral profile captured by the SOI itself: high SOI individuals report greater desire for casual, short-term relationships and less interest in commitment. Research shows that people with a more unrestricted approach to sex are more likely to cheat and less likely to stay in committed relationships (Mattingly et al., 2011). For individuals who prefer casual, short-term mating strategies, infidelity might represent an adaptive behavior that increases access to additional mates rather than a significant threat to social standing. On the other hand, individuals

oriented toward long-term, monogamous relationships might perceive infidelity as particularly threatening, both socially and relationally. This interpretation is further supported by findings that marriages with partners exhibiting higher SOI scores are more likely to dissolve, though this risk is mitigated by frequent sex, high sexual satisfaction, and low relationship stress (French et al., 2019).

Sex Differences: Males View Same-Sex Behaviors More Negatively

Biological sex was less consistently predictive of status perceptions than SOI across the full range of behaviors. However, notable sex differences emerged for specific behavioral categories. Males perceived same-sex behaviors as significantly more damaging to social status compared to females. This finding may reflect documented differences in attitudes toward same-sex behavior, as women report greater fluidity in sexual attraction and are more likely to identify as bisexual than men (Diamond et al., 2016)**.** Additionally, same-sex physical affection (e.g., kissing) is more socially normative and prevalent among women, which may contribute to more permissive attitudes (Rupp & Taylor, 2010).

Interestingly, one overlapping item related to being an affair partner also showed sex differences, with males viewing this behavior as less status-damaging than females did. This suggests that certain infidelity-related behaviors may carry different social consequences depending on the actor's sex, though this pattern requires further investigation.

Exploratory Analysis: Three Distinct Behavioral Clusters

The PCA successfully identified three meaningful clusters that align well with the study's theoretical framework. The first cluster, Morally and Socially Condemned Behaviors, included questions that participants across all SOI levels and both sexes rated as most damaging to social status. Behaviors in this cluster included acts such as sexual coercion and other universally

stigmatized sexual situations. The only subgroup that perceived these behaviors as somewhat less damaging was high SOI males. This finding is consistent with prior research demonstrating that males hold more positive attitudes toward unconventional sexual acts compared to females (Blanc, 2023).

The second cluster, Nontraditional or Norm-Violating Behaviors, combined behaviors associated with out-group mating, same-sex sexual activity, and other stigmatized sexual practices. Males rated behaviors in this cluster more negatively than females, particularly those involving out-group sex. This pattern may reflect evolutionary pressures, as males have been shown to view out-group mating threats more negatively and to hold more negative attitudes toward out-group members generally (Klavina et al., 2011).

The third cluster, Committed, Prosocial Behaviors, revealed no significant differences based on sex or SOI. Moreover, mean scores for all items within this cluster indicated that participants perceived these behaviors as positively impacting social status. Despite high SOI individuals expressing preferences for short-term, casual relationships rather than committed partnerships, they did not differ significantly from other groups in their perception that committed, prosocial sexual behaviors enhance social status. These behaviors are associated with long-term, monogamous relationships, a mating strategy that characterizes human pair-bonding. Although human mating systems are flexible and responsive to social environments, these results suggest that individuals across the SOI spectrum recognize the social value of committed relationships, even if such relationships do not align with their personal preferences.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. The sample size for male participants (n = 31) was substantially smaller than for female participants (n = 69), potentially limiting statistical power to

detect meaningful effects within the male subsample or to test for sex differences. Additionally, the sample was restricted to undergraduate students attending the University of Texas at Austin, which limits the generalizability of these findings. College students at a single institution may not be representative of young adults more broadly, and attitudes toward sexual behavior and social status may vary across educational settings, cultural backgrounds, and geographic regions. Future research would benefit from recruiting larger, more balanced samples and include participants from multiple institutions and diverse demographic backgrounds.

Conclusion

Overall, the present findings demonstrate that short-term and long-term mating orientations, measured by sociosexual orientation (SOI), influence how people perceive the social consequences of sexual behavior. Individuals with more unrestricted orientations, reflecting a short-term mating strategy, viewed morally and socially contentious behaviors, particularly infidelity and casual sex, as less damaging to social status. These results suggest that SOI reflects not just personal behavior, but also broader moral evaluations of others' sexual conduct. Biological sex also predicted attitudes, though primarily for same-sex behaviors, challenging assumptions of universal sex differences in sexual morality. Principal component analysis (PCA) identified three clusters of sexual behaviors, and both SOI and sex predicted attitudes across these clusters, revealing consistent patterns in moral evaluation.

These results highlight that sociosexual orientation functions as a lens through which individuals assess the social consequences of sexual behavior. Such differences may help explain why sexual norms remain contested and why moral consensus is difficult to achieve. Overall, the present study demonstrates that sociosexual orientation—reflecting short-term versus long-term mating strategy—shapes how people perceive and evaluate sexual behavior in social contexts,

providing a framework that could guide future studies on partner choice, social judgment, and the sexual norms.

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Tables

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of the Sex Differences on Social Status Perceptions

Question	H	*p*	Dunn's test
"Having a one-time sexual encounter without commitment"	11.72	.002	High - Low, $p < .001$ High - Medium, $p < .03$ Low - Medium, $p = .05$
"Having an ongoing sexual affair with someone who is already in a steady relationship with someone else"	14.19	< .001	High - Low, $p = .001$ High - Medium, $p = .001$ Low - Medium, $p = .27$
"Having sex with someone because they offered to pay money"	9.07	.01	High - Low, $p < .001$ High - Medium, $p = .06$ Low - Medium, $p = .09$
"While involved in a steady relationship, having a sexual affair with someone else"	13.56	< .001	High - Low, $p = .001$ High - Medium, $p = .001$ Low = Medium, $p = .32$
"While involved in a steady relationship, having an emotional affair with someone else"	6.67	.03	High - Low, $p < .05$ High - Medium, $p < .05$ Low - Medium, $p = .80$
"Having sex with someone without being in love with them"	12.81	.002	High - Low, $p < .001$ High - Medium. $p = .08$ Low - Medium, $p = .01$

Note. This table corresponds to the SOI impacts on social status perceptions illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 4

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) Derived Clusters

Cluster	Sexual Scenarios
Cluster 1: Morally and Socially Condemned Behaviors	"Having sex with one's sibling"
	"Having an ongoing sexual affair with someone already in a steady relationship"
	"Having sex with someone because they offered to pay money"
	"Having sex with one's parent"
	"While in a steady relationship, having a sexual affair with someone else"
	"Having sex with one's cousin"
	"While in a steady relationship, having an emotional affair with someone else"
	"Having sex with an animal"
	"Having sex with a friend's romantic partner"
	"Having an ongoing emotional affair with someone"
	"Having sex with someone who is too intoxicated to consent"
	"Having a brief sexual encounter with a married person while their spouse is away"
Cluster 2: Nontraditional or Norm-Violating Behaviors	"Having a one-time sexual encounter without commitment"
	"Passionately kissing someone of the same sex"
	"Having sex with someone of the same sex"
	"Marrying someone from a different religious

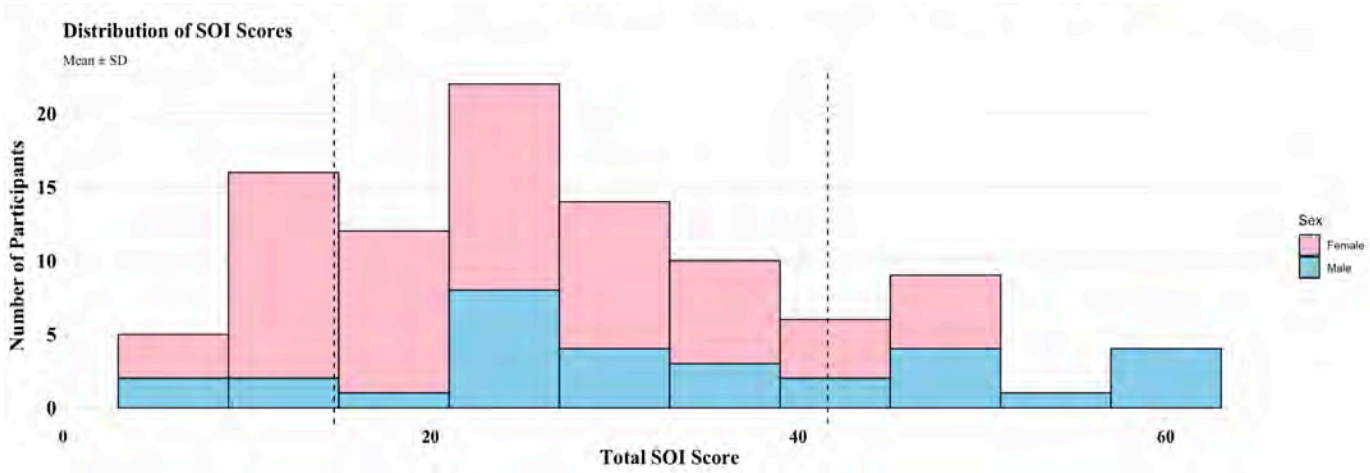
	group”
	“Marrying someone of the same sex”
	“Having sex with someone of a different ethnic group”
	“Having sex without being in love”
	“Having sexual relations exclusively with someone of the same sex”
	“Marrying someone with strongly opposing political views”
	“Watching pornography”
	“Having sexual relations with both men and women (e.g., bisexuality)”
	“Marrying someone from a very different social class”
	“Having a reputation as an easily-accessible sexual partner”
Cluster 3: Committed, Prosocial Behaviors	“Ensuring one’s romantic partner is sexually satisfied”
	“Remaining sexually faithful to one’s romantic partner”
	“Having sex with one’s romantic partner to conceive a child”
	“Cuddling with one’s romantic partner after sex”
	“Telling one’s romantic partner “I love you” during sex”
	“Being honest about one’s sexual history (e.g., number or identity of previous partners)”

Note. This table corresponds to the three-cluster PCA shown in Figure 3.

Figures

Figure 4

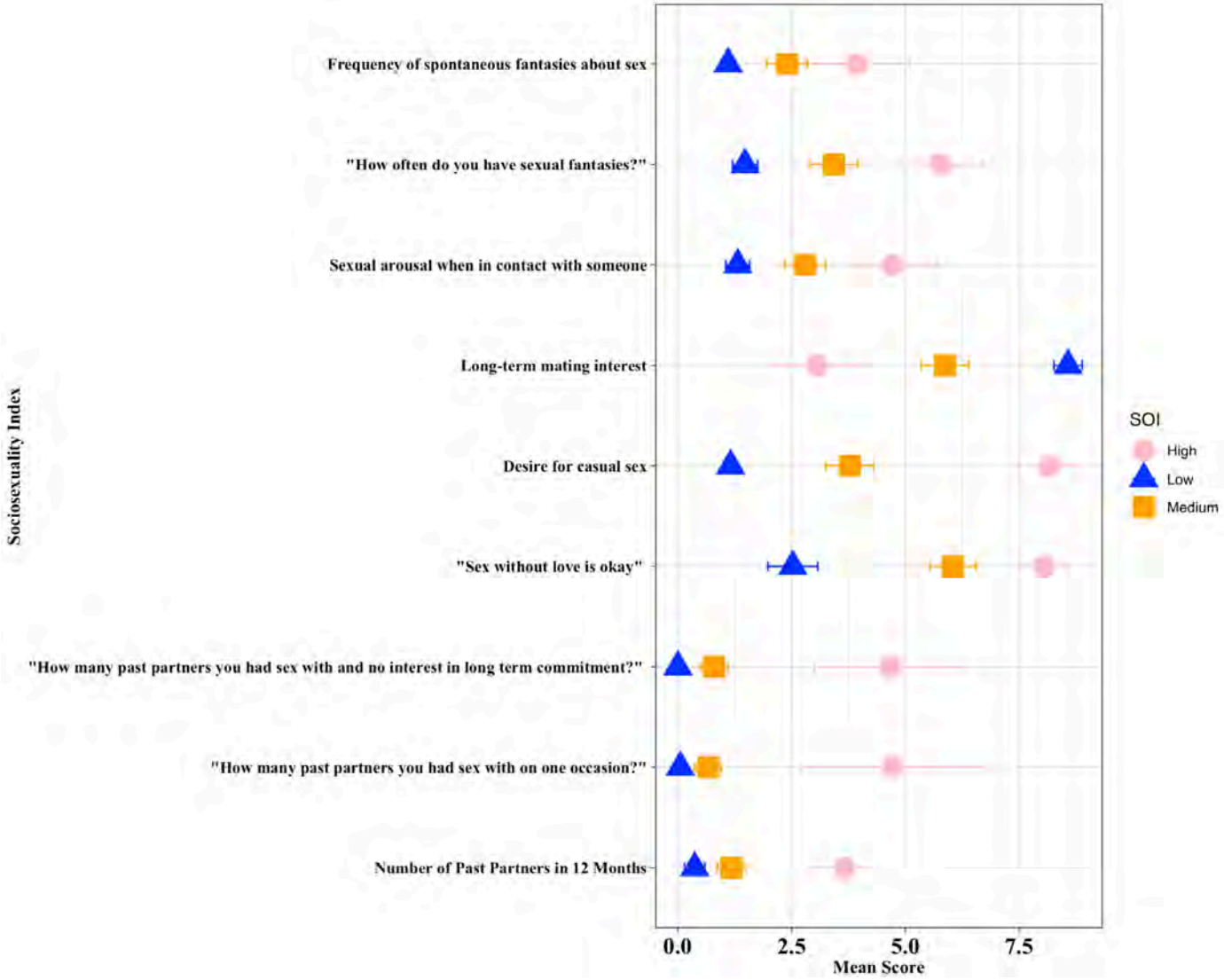
Distribution of SOI Scores



Note. Mean ± SD. All measures were based on participants' self-reported behaviors and preferences.

Figure 5

Mean Scores for Individual Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R) Items



Note: The SOI-R assesses three domains: sexual behavior, sexual attitudes, and sexual desires.

All items differed significantly across SOI groups ($p < .001$, Kruskal-Wallis test).