PERCEPTIONS OF INTIMATE STUDENT–PROFESSOR RELATIONSHIPS

NINA GREGOIRE
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

KIMBERLEY KASEWETER
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

ETHAN KLUKAS
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

PAUL DAVIES
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Abstract

Previous research indicates that university students generally disapprove of intimate student–professor relationships (ISPRs), largely due to power imbalances. Further, students may lose faith in their academic abilities and abandon their studies following sexual overture from a professor. The present research used two studies to explore undergraduate student perceptions of ISPRs. Study 1 employed a 2 (Gender of the Initiator: Male or Female) by 2 (Status of the Initiator: Professor or Student) between-groups vignette design. Study 2 employed the same design as Study 1, adding a third variable—the quality of a reference letter (Overly Positive or Negative) provided by the professor for the student in the relationship. Both studies included sexism as a covariate. Participants were asked to rate four dependent variables: the degree of sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts on others, and the appropriateness of consequences. In Study 1, participants in the Professor as Initiator conditions rated sexual harassment, power imbalance, and impacts to others more severely, regardless of gender. In Study 2, participants in the Overly Positive Letter conditions rated the power imbalance more severely, regardless of gender or status. Adding the reference letter component in Study 2 resulted in participants rating all four dependent variables more severely than those in Study 1, as predicted.

***Keywords**:* sexual harassment, power dynamics, academic policies, perceptions, sexism

Résumé

La recherche a montré que les étudiants universitaires désapprouvent généralement les relations intimes entre professeurs et étudiants (RIPE), en grande partie en raison des déséquilibres de pouvoir. De plus, les étudiants peuvent perdre confiance en leurs capacités académiques et abandonner leurs études à la suite d'une avance sexuelle de la part d'un professeur. La présente recherche utilise deux études pour explorer les perceptions des étudiants de premier cycle à l'égard des RIPE. L'étude 1 a employé un plan factoriel intergroupes 2 (sexe de l'initiateur : homme ou femme) × 2 (statut de l'initiateur : professeur ou étudiant). L'étude 2 a utilisé le même plan que l'étude 1, tout en ajoutant une troisième variable—la qualité d'une lettre de recommandation (excessivement positive ou négative) fournie par le professeur à l'étudiant impliqué dans la relation. Les deux études ont inclus le sexisme comme covariable. Les participants devaient évaluer le degré de harcèlement sexuel, le déséquilibre de pouvoir, l'impact sur autrui et la pertinence des conséquences. Dans l'étude 1, les participants assignés à la condition « professeur comme initiateur » ont évalué le harcèlement sexuel, le déséquilibre de pouvoir et les impacts sur autrui comme plus sévères, indépendamment du sexe ou du statut. Dans l'étude 2, les participants dans la condition « lettre positive » ont évalué le déséquilibre de pouvoir comme plus sévère, indépendamment du sexe ou du statut. Comme prévu, l'ajout de la lettre de recommandation dans l'étude 2 a conduit les participants à évaluer les quatre variables dépendantes de manière plus sévère que dans l'étude 1.

***Mots-clés** : harcèlement sexuel, dynamiques de pouvoir, politiques académiques, perceptions, sexisme*

INTRODUCTION

Intimate relationships between students and their professors have been described as a rite of passage, a coming-of-age story, and a normal part of the university experience (e.g., Kipnis, 2015). Until more recently, intimate student–professor relationships (ISPRs) have been common in Canadian universities. Some have argued that banning them is heavy-handed and paternalistic (Dank & Fulda, 1998); however, these views are shifting, and what was once considered a normal part of the university experience is now being contemplated as exploitative (Southall & Lewin, 2015), deleterious to the integrity of academia, degrading to the role of a mentor (Schuman, 2014), and toxic to the student body as a whole (Drimonis, 2018).

Very few Canadian universities have an explicit policy banning ISPRs; however, as discourse on the topic advances, so does the controversy surrounding the issue of banning such relationships (Gerster, 2018). Evidence-based policy (EBP) has become an established field as well as a critical aspect of policy creation and refinement (Pawson, 2006). An EBP approach is particularly useful when working toward a policy that is designed around sensitive issues (Pawson, 2006). By studying perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, EBP allows policy makers to create policies that satisfy needs and safeguard vulnerabilities.

When contemplating policies surrounding ISPRs, it is crucial to consider several social-psychological constructs. These constructs include stereotyping (i.e., a belief or association that links a whole group of people with certain traits or characteristics), sexism (i.e., discrimination based on sex), and victim-blaming (i.e., assigning fault to the victim of an offence as opposed to the perpetrator). Further, it is critical to understand how these factors may influence the ethos of Canadian universities.

Stereotyping and Sexism

Gender stereotypes depicting women as sexual objects and men as sexually insatiable are commonplace in North American culture (Swim et al., 2001; Terrance et al., 2004). For instance, in individuals aged 17–19, the endorsement of stereotypes that men are sex-focused and women are sex objects is shown to link with actual sexualized behaviour (Jewell & Brown, 2013). Specifically, men reported making more harassing comments, jokes, gestures, and being more physically assertive than did women of the same demographic (Jewell & Brown, 2013). These findings suggest that both men and women permit men to be sexually assertive in their sexual objectification of women and, in a broader scope, both men and women tacitly endorse the stereotype that females should be passive and males should be assertive (Kim et al., 2007).

These societal gender stereotypes form the basis of the Heterosexual Script, which involves men and women simultaneously enacting sexualized gender stereotypes (Kim et al., 2007; Tolman et al., 2007) and can be viewed as a social script for sexualized interactions between heterosexual men and women in North America (Oliver & Hyde, 1995). Arising from the Heterosexual Script is the notion that women can use their sexuality as a commodity to gain some share of male privilege (Kim et al., 2007; Tolman, 2006).

There is a significant body of research indicating that, due to these norms, the sexual behaviours of men and women are frequently judged differently (e.g., Howell et al., 2011; Marks & Fraley, 2006). Much of the research on sexual double standards has been centred on the notion that men are granted more sexual freedom than women (Howell et al., 2011). Despite men having more sexual freedom than women, multiple studies have found that, under certain circumstances (e.g., when a power imbalance is present), men are punished more severely for their sexual behaviour than women (e.g., Smith et al., 1997). For example, one study found that men were more likely to judge an adult–child sexual interaction as sexual abuse when the adult was male than when the adult was female (Smith et al., 1997).

Findings that higher-powered men are condemned more severely for their involvement in inappropriate sexual activity, relative to women, is an ostensible incongruity of the sexual double standard. While men are afforded greater sexual freedom, this is only true if the circumstances involve a female partner of similar status (e.g., a consensual casual encounter with a peer; Sheeran et al., 1996). Inversely, men are judged more harshly in circumstances where they are perceived to have inherent power over the other individual (e.g., a teacher and a student; Fromuth & Holt, 2008). Therefore, when there is apparent exploitation of power by one of the parties involved in sexual contact, the circumstance can be described as following a reverse sexual double standard (Howell et al., 2011). In the case of a university professor and student, there is an undeniable imbalance of power. Given this power imbalance, it is plausible that when a male professor is the initiator of an ISPR, he will be adjudicated more harshly than a female professor in the same situation.

Victim Blaming

Victim blaming is a phenomenon that occurs when a victim is held either fully or partially accountable for their victimization (Lerner & Miller, 1978). When considering sexual misconduct, previous research indicates that less blame is assigned to non-flirtatious victims than to flirtatious victims (Landström et al., 2016). Further, the perception that sexual misconduct victims are deserving of their suffering allows one to maintain the view that the world is fair, thus allowing the perceiver to maintain the notion that these types of offences do not happen to good people and, by extension, to themself (Dalbert, 2009).

Students who learn about the ISPRs of their peers may be persuaded to rely on the context of the relationship, rather than the mere existence of the relationship, when considering possible consequences or when making judgements. Specifically, students who learn of ISPRs on their campuses may ask questions regarding the initiation, outcomes, and general

circumstances of the relationship when judging it. Depending on the context of the relationship, fault may be assigned differently based on the factors of the relationship.

Victim blaming can lead to reduced reporting, as it fosters a victim's belief that they are responsible for the offence and somehow encouraged it. Failure to report sexual harassment leads to the perpetuation of the cycle of harassment because the perpetrator of the abuse is not held accountable for their actions and is, therefore, free to continue (Hayes et al., 2013). An unclear policy on ISPRs can further contribute to victim blaming and discourage reporting. As such, students who participate in/observe intimate student–professor relationships may wish to report such interactions but have no clear policy directing them to report it, leaving them in a vulnerable position and unprotected by their institution. It is not surprising, therefore, that sexual harassment remains underreported and its effects remain unclear and complicated in university settings (Aguilar & Baek, 2020; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Klein & Martin, 2022).

Understanding ISPRs as Sexual Misconduct

Past studies have indicated that 37% of male faculty at surveyed universities had attempted to initiate a personal and/or sexual relationship with at least one female student, with 26% reporting sexual involvement (Fitzgerald et al., 1988). A more recent informal poll indicated that 14% of post-secondary students had inappropriate relations with a professor (College Stats, 2016). A study involving students and professors who had engaged in ISPRs found that the majority advised others against engaging in such relationships. Nearly all respondents believed that ISPRs were never appropriate in supervisory situations and voiced support for policies prohibiting them in such circumstances (Bellas & Gossett, 2001).

Keith-Spiegel and colleagues (1993) found that students viewed professors engaged in ISPRs as unethical, and the students involved as having an unearned advantage. Both men and women found sexual advances and flirting by professors highly unethical, with women showing higher sensitivity. Students also deemed behaviours like writing fraudulent reference letters and grading based on favouritism as severely unethical, a view shared by professors. Additionally, ISPRs often make the students involved feel uncomfortable and unable to extract themselves from the relationship.

Cortina et al. (1998) found that university women who were asked about various behaviours did not recognize sexually harassing behaviours when they experienced them. Explanations for this inability may be a fear of being stigmatized, a lack of a clear understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, or the misinterpretation of harassing behaviours as flattery or humour (Stockdale & Vaux, 1993). Women who experienced harassment reported negative views of academia and the general treatment of women on campus (Cortina et al., 1998). This sample of women also recounted significant consequences, including lowered confidence regarding their schoolwork, impaired ability to concentrate, and the complete withdrawal from university. The impact was so severe that many women stated that, if given the choice, they would choose not to attend university again (Cortina et al., 1998).

The present study is grounded in a quid pro quo form of harassment, which recognizes that even if a student initiates a relationship, the inherent power imbalance creates conditions that can be exploitative. Similarly, sexual script theory helps explain how cultural norms shape views on ISPRs and influence responses such as stereotyping, sexism, and victim blaming.

Research Questions

The #MeToo era has heightened public awareness of consent and the consequences of power-based relationships. It is important to evaluate perceptions and potential consequences of ISPRs in those most likely to be affected by them (i.e., undergrads). As such, two vignette studies were conducted to answer the following research questions:

(Q1) Do certain factors (Gender of Initiator, Status of Initiator, and Quality of Ref-

erence Letter) influence students' opinions of ISPRs?

> (Q2) Do students perceive certain aspects (sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others, and consequences) more severely when the consequences of an ISPR (a reference letter) are made salient?

To test the theoretical and empirical considerations outlined above, the following hypotheses were formulated to guide the analysis.

Study 1:

> (Q1 – H1) It is anticipated that there will be a main effect of gender (males rated more severely than females) and status (professors rated more severely than students), as well as an interaction between gender and status. Specifically, it is expected that the cell driving this interaction will be the male professor as initiator.

Study 2:

> (Q1 – H2) It is anticipated that there will be a main effect of gender (males rated more severely than females), status (professors rated more severely than students), letter (overly positive letters rated more severely than negative letters), and an interaction. As such, it is anticipated that the cell driving the effect would be the male professor as initiator who writes the overly positive letter.

Research hypothesis (Studies 1 and 2):

> (Q2 – H3) Mean scores will indicate that those who participate in Study 2 (those who view Reference Letters) will rate the relationship more severely across all dependent variables (sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others, and consequences) than those who participated in Study 1.

METHOD

Participants

Participants (N_{s1} = 371; N_{s2} = 549) were undergraduate students at a Canadian university who were enrolled in a psychology course. Participants were recruited through the university's online psychology research portal. The studies were run concurrently and contained the same description. Those who opted in to one study were excluded from participating in the other. Participants were awarded a one percent credit toward an eligible course for their time.

A priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for a factorial ANCOVA using a two-tailed test, a small effect size, and an alpha of .05. Results showed that a total sample of approximately 330 (Study 1) and 530 (Study 2) participants was required to achieve a power of .95. After those who failed the manipulation checks were removed from the sample, 371 (Study 1) and 549 (Study 2) participants remained, resulting in adequate power.

Materials

Vignette presentation, administration of questionnaires, and recording of participant responses were all carried out using Qualtrics, an online survey system.

Vignettes

To explore student perceptions of ISPRs, a between-group design was employed using four vignettes for Study 1 (Appendix A; Study 2 featured eight vignettes). In each vignette, the relationship described was between a professor and student, where the professor was in a direct supervisory role over the student. All couplings were heterosexual.

The vignettes utilized a manipulation of both the gender (Gender of the Initiator: Male or Female) and status (Status of the Initiator: Professor or Student) of the initiator to explore the influence of initiator characteristics on perceptions. Therefore, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (a) male professor initiates with a female student, (b) female professor initiates with a male student, (c) fe-

male student initiates with male professor, or (d) male student initiates with a female professor.

Each vignette was presented as a brief outline of the relationship from a third-party perspective, which introduced the gender and status of the initiator, followed by a series of text messages. The text messages were designed to look like a screenshot taken from a smartphone. The text messages were employed to restate the initiator, provide context of the initiation, and maintain participant interest in the story. Depending on the condition, the exchange began with one of the characters asking the other on a date, which they accepted. The text messages were based on stories of ISPRs shared online (e.g., Anonymous, 2015, 2018). Following the presentation of the text messages was a brief summation indicating the trajectory of the relationship (i.e., the pair continued to publicly date for a period of time and it is unknown if they stayed together).

Study 2 employed identical materials, procedure, and design to Study 1, with the addition of a third variable—the quality (i.e., overly positive or negative) of a graduate school reference letter (Appendix B) provided by the professor involved in the relationship. As such, Study 2 was a 2 (Gender of Initiator) by 2 (Status of Initiator) by 2 (Reference Letter Quality) between-groups design and, thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of eight groups.

The inclusion of the Reference Letter Quality condition allowed for the exploration of how perceptions of ISPRs varied when the consequences of the relationships were made salient. That is, the student in the scenario received either an overly positive or an overly negative reference letter from the professor with whom they engaged in an intimate relationship in each of the same conditions described in Study 1.

Self-Report Measures

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996) measures sexist attitudes held toward women (Zaikman & Marks, 2014) and was used as a covariate (CV) in the present study. Specifically, the ASI assesses both hostile and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism (sexist antipathy) taps into the dimensions of dominative paternalism, competitive gender differentiation, and heterosexual hostility. Benevolent sexism taps into the dimensions of protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy. The questions on the 22-item scale are scored on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = disagree strongly, to 6 = agree strongly). Scores for each item are summed to create a total score, ranging from 22 to 132. Higher overall scores on the ASI are indicative of general overall sexist views toward women. Sexist attitudes held toward women was statistically controlled as a covariate, as pre-existing sexist beliefs could systematically influence how participants evaluate intimate student–professor relationships. Six studies validating the ASI, which included data from 2,250 respondents, found it to have predictive, discriminant, and convergent validity (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Outcome questionnaire. A 25-item outcome questionnaire, serving as the dependent variable (DV), was designed to assess participants' perceptions of the relationship described in the vignettes. Specifically, the questionnaire asked participants to rate the degree to which they endorsed a series of statements using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These statements were designed to tap into four perceptual domains pertaining to ISPRs: power imbalance (seven items), sexual harassment (eight items), impacts on others (five items), and consequences (five items).

Mean composite scores were created for each domain by averaging participant responses to the questions associated with each variable (power imbalance, sexual harassment, impacts on others, and consequences) and served as the DVs in this study. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to test the internal consistency with all values in the acceptable range (Study 1 = .72–.82; Study 2 = .66–.76).

Study 1 and 2 Procedure

Participants were provided a consent form and were randomly assigned to one of the four vignettes used in Study 1 or one of eight vignettes in Study 2. Participants were told that they would be provided with a (ostensibly) true story about an intimate relationship between a student and professor. In Study 2, participants also read one of the graduate school reference letters provided by the professor in the relationship. Additionally, they were informed that they would be tested on the content of the vignette and thus should pay close attention. Once participants read the vignette, they were directed to the outcome questionnaire and asked to rate the degree to which they believed the relationship described in the vignette demonstrated a power imbalance, sexual harassment, impacts on others, and consequences. Participants then completed the ASI, which was used as a CV to control for sexism. Participants were then asked manipulation check questions to ensure they had adequately understood and attended to the vignettes presented. Lastly, participants provided their demographic information and were debriefed.

Study 1: Analytical Approach

Factorial ANCOVAs were employed to analyze the effects of gender and status on three of the four dependent variables (power imbalance, sexual harassment, and consequences), while covarying for sexism. If the assumptions were not met for ANCOVA (e.g., impact on others DV), the covariate was not used and a factorial ANOVA was employed.

Study 2: Analytical Approach

The analytic approach described in Study 1 was followed in Study 2 with the addition of a series of *t*-tests to explore if the explicit mention of a consequence of having an ISPR (i.e., the addition of a reference letter) lead to increased levels of perceived disapproval of the relationship across the domains.

RESULTS

Study 1 Results

Descriptives

Descriptive information was calculated for each of the DVs and the CV (Table 1). For each of the DVs, a score ranging from zero to five was possible, with high scores indicating more perceived severity for the construct being tested. For the CV, the complete scale score was used, with scores ranging from 22–132 and higher scores being indicative of higher degrees of sexism. Participants generally rated the DVs in the high-moderate range and the CV in the lower range. The results of the bivariate correlations demonstrated that there was a small and negative significant relationship between the CV and three of the DVs (power imbalance, sexual harassment, and consequences), meaning that those who held less-sexist views deemed the effects of the relationship as more egregious (Table 2).

Research Question 1

To determine whether characteristics of the initiator influenced participants' perceptions of the relationships, a factorial ANOVA and three factorial ANCOVAs were conducted.

Power imbalance. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived power imbalance, $F(1, 367) = 36.29$, $p < .001$, $= .090$. There was also a small and significant main effect of status on perceived power imbalance after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 367) = 5.75$, $p = .017$, $= .015$. However, no main effect was found for gender, and the interaction between gender and status on the power imbalance variable was also nonsignificant (Table 3). These findings indicate that, when controlling for sexism, participants rating for the Professor as Initiator conditions found that there was a greater degree of power imbalance, regardless of the initiator's gender, than in the Student as Initiator conditions.

Table 1
Descriptive Information for Dependent Variables and Covariate

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	*SD*	Cronbach's alpha
DV-PI	1.71	5.00	3.72	0.68	.79
DV-SH	1.25	4.50	2.94	0.61	.72
DV-Imp	1.60	5.00	3.83	0.73	.82
DV-Cons	1.80	5.00	3.79	0.66	.76
CV-ASI	22.00	101.00	54.40	20.13	.93

Note. DV-PI = power imbalance; DV-SH = sexual harassment; DV-Imp = impacts on others; DV-Cons = consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. DV scores are averages with possible scores of 0 to 5. CV score is the complete scale total with possible scores from 22–132. *N* = 371.

Table 2
Bivariate Pearson Correlations Among Variables

Variable	DV-PI	DV-SH	DV-Imp	DV-Cons	CV-ASI
DV-PI	1.00				
DV-SH	.70**	1.00			
DV-Imp	.69**	.63**	1.00		
DV-Cons	.70**	.61**	.73**	1.00	
CV-ASI	-.29**	-.14*	-.06	-.15*	1.00

Note. DV-PI = power imbalance; DV-SH = sexual harassment; DV-Imp = impacts on others; DV-Cons = consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. N = 371.
* $p < .01$.
** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Factorial ANCOVA Results for Power Imbalances – Study 1

Group Variables	*SS*	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Covariate[a]	15.11	1	36.29	< .001**	.090
Status[b]	2.39	1	5.75	.017*	.015
Gender[c]	0.57	1	1.38	.241	.004
Status x Gender	0.07	1	0.07	.691	.000
Residual	152.39	367	0.42		

Note. Both [b] and [c] refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.
[a] *Covariate = Total score on ASI.*
[b] *Status levels = Professor and Student.*
[c] *Gender levels = Male and Female.*
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .001$.

Sexual harassment. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived sexual harassment, $F(1, 367) = 8.56$, $p = .004$, $= .023$. There was also a significant effect of status on perceived sexual harassment after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 367) = 7.28$, $p = .007$, $= .020$. However, no main effect was found for gender, and the interaction between gender and status on power imbalance was also nonsignificant (Table 4). These findings indicate that participants rating for the Professor as Initiator conditions found that there was a greater degree of sexual harassment, regardless of gender, than in the Student as Initiator conditions, when controlling for sexism.

Impacts on others. The factorial ANOVA indicated that there was a small and significant difference on scores concerning the variable of impact on others among the status levels, $F(1, 367) = 5.17$, $p = .024$, $= .014$. However, no main effect was found for gender, and the interaction between gender and status on power imbalance was also nonsignificant (Table 5). These results indicate that participants rating for the Professor as Initiator conditions believed there was a larger impact of the relationship on others, regardless of gender, than in the Student as Initiator conditions.

Consequences. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of consequences, $F(1, 367) = 8.65$, $p = .003$, $= .023$. Additionally, there was a marginally significant effect (Table 6) of gender on consequences after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 367) = 5.75$, $p = .052$, $= .010$. This marginally significant effect indicates that, when controlling for sexism, participants rating for the Male as Initiator conditions found there should be more severe consequences (e.g., punishment) for the relationship than participants rating for the Female as Initiator conditions.

Study 2 Results

Descriptives

Participants in Study 2 generally rated the DVs in the high end of the moderate range and the CV in the lower range (Table 7). These scores suggest that, overall, the participants took the actions of those in the vignettes seriously. These scores further indicate that the participants in the study hold low levels of sexist attitudes toward women.

A correlation matrix was derived to test the relationships between each of the DVs as well as the CV (Table 8). The results of the bivariate correlations demonstrated that there was a small and negative significant relationship between the CV and all the DVs (i.e., power imbalance, sexual harassment, impacts on others, and consequences) ranging from -.15 to -.29, *p*s < .05. These correlations imply that those who held less-sexist views deemed the effects of the relationship as more egregious. Further, there were large and significant positive correlations between the DVs ranging from .52 to .70, *p*s < .05, indicating that participants who endorsed one DV were also likely to endorse the others.

Research Question 1

Power imbalance. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived power imbalance, $F(1, 540) = 48.56$, $p < .001$, $= .083$. There was also a small, significant main effect of quality of reference letter on perceived power imbalance after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 540) = 10.51$, $p = .001$, $= .019$. No other main effects or interactions were significant (Table 9). These findings indicate that, when controlling for sexism, the participants found that there was a more severe power imbalance in the relationship when the student in the relationship received an overly positive reference letter.

Sexual harassment. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived sexual harassment, $F(1, 540) = 37.40$, $p < .001$, $= .065$. There was also a very small and marginally significant main effect of status on perceived sexual harassment after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 540) = 3.64$, $p = .057$, $= .007$. No other main effects or interactions were significant (Table 10). These results imply that, when controlling for sexism, the participants trended toward the finding that there was more severe sexual harassment in the relationship when the relationship was initiated by a professor.

Table 4
Factorial ANCOVA Results for Sexual Harassment – Study 1

Group Variables	*SS*	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Covariate[a]	3.04	1	8.56	.004*	.023
Status[b]	2.57	1	7.28	.007*	.020
Gender[c]	0.98	1	2.78	.096	.008
Status x Gender	0.00	1	0.00	.947	.000
Residual	129.33	367			

Note. Both [b] and [c] refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.
[a] Covariate = Total score on ASI.
[b] Status levels = Professor and Student.
[c] Gender levels = Male and Female.
** p < .01.*

Table 5
Factorial ANOVA[1] Results for Impacts on Others – Study 1

Group Variables	*SS*	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Status[a]	2.73	1	5.17	.024*	.014
Gender[b]	0.29	1	0.55	.460	.001
Status x Gender	0.14	1	0.27	.269	.001
Residual	193.62	367			

Note. [1] Indicates that a factorial ANOVA was employed as the assumptions for ANCOVA were not met. Both [a] and [b] refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.
[a] Status levels = Professor and Student.
[b] Gender levels = Male and Female.
** p < .05.*

Table 6
Factorial ANCOVA Results for Consequences – Study 1

Group Variables	*SS*	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Covariate[a]	3.63	1	8.65	.003**	.023
Status[b]	0.16	1	0.37	.543	.001
Gender[c]	1.60	1	3.82	.052*	.010
Status x Gender	0.07	1	0.16	.718	.000
Residual	153.63	367			

Note. Both [b] and [c] refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.
[a] Covariate = Total score on ASI.
[b] Status levels = Professor and Student.
[c] Gender levels = Male and Female.
* $p = .052$.
** $p < .01$.

Table 7
Descriptive Information for Dependent Variables and Covariate

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	*SD*	Cronbach's alpha
DV-PI	2.14	5.00	3.98	0.59	.74
DV-SH	1.25	4.50	3.06	0.56	.66
DV-Imp	2.20	5.00	4.07	0.61	.76
DV-Cons	1.60	5.00	3.95	0.57	.68
CV-ASI	22.00	113.00	54.68	19.61	.93

Note. DV-PI = power imbalance; DV-SH = sexual harassment; DV-Imp = impacts on others; DV-Cons = consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. DV scores are averages with possible scores of 0 to 5. CV score is the complete scale total with possible scores from 22–132. *N* = 549.

Table 8
Bivariate Pearson Correlations Among Variables

Variable	DV-PI	DV-SH	DV-Imp	DV-Cons	CV-ASI
DV-PI	1.00				
DV-SH	.59*	1.00			
DV-Imp	.60*	.52*	1.00		
DV-Cons	.70*	.54*	.65*	1.00	
CV-ASI	-.29*	-.25*	-.15*	-.16*	1.00

Note. DV-PI = power imbalance; DV-SH = sexual harassment; DV-Imp = impacts on others; DV-Cons = consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. N = 549.
* $p < .001$.

Table 9
Factorial ANCOVA Results for Power Imbalance – Study 2

Group Variables	SS	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Covariate[a]	15.15	1	48.56	<.001*	.083
Status[b]	0.94	1	3.02	.083	.006
Gender[c]	0.09	1	0.27	.603	.001
Letter[d]	3.28	1	10.51	.001*	.019
Status x Gender	0.01	1	0.03	.875	.000
Gender x Letter	0.04	1	0.11	.739	.000
Status x Letter	0.00	1	0.01	.937	.000
Status x Gender x Letter	0.01	1	0.03	.870	.000
Residual	168.42	540			

Note. Both [b] and [c] refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.
[a] Covariate = Total score on ASI.
[b] Status levels = Professor and Student.
[c] Gender levels = Male and Female.
[d] Letter levels = Overly Positive and Overly Negative.
* $p \leq .001$.

Table 10
Factorial ANCOVA Results for Sexual Harassment – Study 2

Group Variables	*SS*	*df*	F	p	η_p^2
Covariate[a]	10.72	1	37.40	<.001**	.065
Status[b]	1.04	1	3.64	.057*	.007
Gender[c]	0.28	1	0.97	.325	.002
Letter[d]	0.62	1	2.15	.143	.004
Status x Gender	0.02	1	0.07	.793	.000
Gender x Letter	1.24	1	4.31	.038*	.008
Status x Letter	0.02	1	0.08	.776	.000
Status x Gender x Letter	0.04	1	0.14	.711	.000
Residual	154.80	540			

Note. Both [b] and [c] refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.
[a] Covariate = Total score on ASI.
[b] Status levels = Professor and Student.
[c] Gender levels = Male and Female.
[d] Letter levels = Overly Positive and Overly Negative.
** p = .057.*
*** p < .001.*

Impacts on others. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived impacts on others, $F(1, 540) = 13.37$, $p < .001$, $= .024$. There were no significant main effects or interactions. These results indicate that there were no differences between any of the groups on perceived impacts on others.

Consequences. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of consequences, $F(1, 540) = 14.30$, $p < .001$, $= .26$. There were no other significant main effects or interactions. These results indicate that there were no differences between any of the groups regarding consequences.

Research Question 2

Study 2 vs. Study 1. Per H3, it was anticipated that the overall means on the scores of the DVs would be significantly higher in Study 2 than in Study 1 due to the addition of the third variable (quality of the reference letter). Based on four one-tailed, independent-sample *t*-tests, it was found that the means for all the DVs were significantly higher in Study 2 than in Study 1, all *ps* < .001. Analysis of the CV indicated that levels of sexism were equal across the two studies.

DISCUSSION

Study 1

It was thought that for Study 1, the condition driving the effects would be the Male Professor as Initiator. The findings of Study 1 partially support this hypothesis. Specifically, the Status of Initiator was found to be a significant variable in terms of power imbalance, sexual harassment, and impacts on others, indicating that the student participants in Study 1 recognize the roles of students and professors as being unequal within the university setting. This finding implies that, in the general context of ISPRs, participants recognize the deleterious effects of ISPRs on both the student involved in the ISPR and the student body as a whole and place the accountability for these effects on the professor, regardless of the professor's gender. In further partial support of the hypothesis, gender was a significant variable in terms of consequences. This finding falls in line with the reverse double standard as it demonstrates that, within the general context of an ISPR, regardless of status, males are vulnerable to more severe consequences.

Study 2

Study 2 aimed to determine how students perceive ISPRs, if there is a difference between the perceptions of males and females, and if the manipulation of certain factors changes the perceptions of the participants. Further, Study 2 aimed to determine if the perceptions of ISPRs are adjudicated more severely when the consequences of the relationship are made salient.

The main hypothesis for Study 2 was that the conditions driving the effects would be the Male Professor as Initiator who writes the Overly Positive Letter, and the results offered some support for the hypothesis. The means for all the DVs were significantly higher in Study 2 than in Study 1, which provides support for H3, lending evidence to the notion that when there is a stated consequence to the ISPR, students hold stronger opinions on ISPRs.

Despite the overall increase in scores, the inclusion of the letter component seemingly washed out the effects seen in Study 1, where the relationship described had no consequential outcome. The only finding to hold partially consistent was the Professor as Initiator approaching significance with respect to sexual harassment. This finding lends partial support to the notion that ISPRs may be perceived as sexual harassment, particularly when instigated by a professor. Interestingly, status was no longer a significant variable in power imbalance, and instead, the Overly Positive Letter aspect was perceived as the source of an imbalance of power. This finding may be partially due to a reference letter being a powerful commodity in academia.

The largely null results arising from Study 2 may be due to a ceiling effect in the ratings. These results may indicate that, once there are explicitly stated consequences to an ISPR, whether negative or positive, student views shift in such a way that they all perceive the relationship as equally damaging regardless of any other circumstances. The finding that students perceive ISPRs less favourably when there is an explicitly stated outcome is evidence that, when the consequences are made apparent, students more readily view ISPRs as being very damaging to those involved as well as to others.

Implications

The results of this research may have important implications for academic institutions. Previous research has indicated that there are far-reaching and detrimental consequences of ISPRs for targets, the surrounding student body, and the institution (Drimonis, 2018). These inherent risks, combined with the present findings, provide justification for universities to ban the initiation of power-imbalanced relationships. Such rules commonly exist in many other professional domains with little to no controversy (e.g., massage therapists and clients). While these dynamics are not identical, they do involve many of the same vulnerabilities, and, as evidenced in this project, students desire to be granted the same protections. Students surveyed in the present study broadly endorsed the need for university-imposed intervention and consequences. Our recommendation is to ban the initiation of new power-imbalanced relationships. Existing relationships would be managed through established conflict-of-interest policies. Based on the present findings, it seems that policies banning ISPRs are *not* viewed as paternalistic and heavy-handed; rather, they can be viewed as *integral* to educational equity.

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of this research is that the sample employed was from the direct population of interest and the stimuli were grounded in real-world scenarios; as such, it is highly generalizable to other Canadian post-secondary samples. The present research also asks about perceptions across multiple domains (i.e., power imbalances, sexual harassment, impacts on others, and consequences), allowing for a more holistic understanding of the views on ISPRs.

It should be noted that the present studies are not without limitations. In particular, to increase experimental control and statistical power, the vignettes depicted a simple relationship that only varied in the gender and status of the initiator. Of note, the present research did not examine the influence of other potentially important factors such as age, attractiveness, or

non-heteronormative pairings. Consequently, the present study did not have all the nuisances that might occur in everyday life and should be interpreted with this in mind. Given that it was not feasible for the current research to investigate all these variables, future research should consider them.

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