

Perceptions of Prostitution: What Drives Opposition?

Tiffany R. Abrams, Lauren M. Banicki, and Angela G. Pirlott*
Department of Psychology, Saint Xavier University

ABSTRACT. The current studies intended to understand opposition to prostitution among a sample of U.S. Americans using a mixed-methods approach. In Study 1, we examined beliefs about prostitution using an open-ended approach without relying on researcher-conceived perceptions. In Study 2, we examined whether opposition to prostitution stems primarily from the presumed negative confounding factors (identified in Study 1) and explored reasons for remaining opposition. In Study 1, 116 U.S. adults recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) reported up to 10 beliefs about prostitution. Researchers coded responses and identified common themes, including desperation, STIs/disease, physical abuse, drugs/alcohol, trafficking, exploitation, cheating, enslavement, legal issues, and immorality. In Study 2, we used a within-subjects quantitative experimental design in which 153 U.S. adults recruited from MTurk read 2 prostitution scenarios—1 including the presumed co-occurring negative contextual factors and 1 neutralizing those factors—and rated their opposition and provided reasoning for such opposition. Neutralizing the negative confounding factors decreased opposition to prostitution (from 95% to 19%; $OR = 10.65$; $d = 1.76$; $ps < .001$). Residual opposition to prostitution in the neutralized condition stemmed from lingering beliefs about harm and “immorality.” These studies extend the literature by identifying common perceptions of prostitution and evincing that the presumed confounding negative factors primarily drive opposition to prostitution. The discussion explores reasons underlying residual opposition in the neutralized condition.

Keywords: prostitution, sex work, transactional sex, mixed methods, attitudes, beliefs

Approximately 6% of U.S. adults have paid for or have been paid for sex since age 18 during their lifetime with 2% having paid for or been paid for sex in the last year (based on a representative sample of U.S. Americans; Davern et al., 2021). This suggests that, at minimum, prostitution affects a fair number of U.S. Americans.

¹We acknowledge that other pairings of prostitution exist, (e.g., as bought and sold by men, as bought by women and sold by men). However, sex as bought by men and sold by women seems to be the most common form of prostitution (e.g., Ditmore, 2011), and due to its commonality, is likely what comes to mind when thinking about prostitution and therefore is likely the salient scenario that drives “attitudes toward prostitution.” As such, this paper focuses on prostitution as sold by women and purchased by men.



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The legal definition of prostitution varies between U.S. state jurisdictions but generally refers to the “exchange of sexual services for goods or money” (Ditmore, 2011 p. xix). Some research distinguishes between “outdoor” and “indoor” prostitution, which refers to solicitation occurring “on the streets” versus in an enclosed space (e.g., strip club, brothel), respectively. This paper uses the phrase “prostitution” to refer to the exchange of sexual behaviors (e.g., intercourse, oral sex, manual sex) for money or other highly valued goods (e.g., drugs) and will specifically focus on prostitution as sold by women and purchased by men.¹ We use the term “prostitution” because it refers

specifically to the exchange of sex for money or other goods, and does not necessarily include other acts that fit within the broader category of “sex work,” e.g., exotic dancing, sexual massage, pornography, and because the term “sex work” has been criticized as a neutralized term employed by activists but not necessarily adopted by workers themselves (e.g., Ditmore, 2011; see also Paul, 2023).

Attitudes Toward Prostitution

U.S. Americans’ attitudes toward prostitution vary. Results from the 2016 Marist Institute poll, which utilized a representative sample of U.S. adults, suggest that 49% of U.S. adults believe that prostitution between two consenting adults should be legal, whereas 44% disagree. Results from a representative sample from the 2016 YouGov poll suggest that more U.S. Americans think buying and selling sex should be illegal (45% and 43%, respectively) than legal (39% and 40%, respectively), and that buying and selling sex is morally wrong (57% and 56%, respectively) compared to morally acceptable (24% and 25%, respectively). Using the most recent 2017 U.S. World Values Survey data (Haerper et al., 2022), our own analyses revealed that U.S. Americans predominantly oppose prostitution ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 2.70$) on a scale of 1 (*never justifiable*) to 10 (*always justifiable*), with 37% of adults agreeing that prostitution is never justifiable. However, U.S. adults’ attitudes toward prostitution became more accepting over time [1981 to present; $r(6,430) = .21$, $p < .001$] based on our own analyses. The current investigation sought to understand the reasons underlying opposition to prostitution in a U.S. sample.

Explaining Attitudes Toward Prostitution

Understandable given its position as an interdisciplinary issue (e.g., examined in criminal justice, public and social policy, public health, feminism, sociology, psychology), prostitution has been abundantly examined (e.g., over 320,000 results on Google scholar for “attitudes toward prostitution”). However, not much of the research has focused on explaining attitudes toward prostitution, and therefore, given this lack of research and given the cultural similarities between the U.S. and the “Western World,” (e.g., Canada, Australia, and Western Europe), we include research from the “Western World” to help inform the current investigation, which focuses on U.S. Americans’ attitudes. Several common patterns have arisen, which we summarize below.

Worldviews or values systems predicting opposition to prostitution have been identified in the literature. Religiosity consistently predicts opposition to beliefs that prostitution is justifiable, acceptable, or moral, or should be legal, among samples of U.S. Americans, Canadians, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, and cross-cultural samples

(Cao et al., 2017; Cao & Maguire, 2013; Chon, 2015; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Mancini et al., 2020). Authoritarianism also routinely predicts opposition to beliefs that prostitution is justifiable, among samples of U.S. Americans and Canadians (Cao et al., 2017; Cao & Maguire, 2013). Research findings on whether conservatism or liberalism predicts opposition to prostitution have been mixed (e.g., Chon, 2015; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). Studies sampling U.S. Americans have demonstrated that conservatism predicts reduced support for legalized prostitution among men (Mancini et al., 2020), and self-identified Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe that buying and selling sex is morally wrong and should be illegal (YouGov Poll, 2016). Religiosity, authoritarianism, and conservatism have been proposed to reflect a common underlying trait of “obedience to authority” (Bouchard, 2009) and thus it makes sense that these characteristics correlate with opposition to prostitution, particularly if prostitution is illegal.

Gender role attitudes are also typically related to attitudes toward prostitution. Among samples in Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Spain, and the U.K., support of gender equality predicts beliefs that prostitution is morally wrong and opposition to buying and selling sex and legalizing the buying and selling of sex (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). Endorsement of traditional (i.e., nonegalitarian) gender roles also predicts acceptability of prostitution among a Canadian sample (Cao et al., 2017).

Somewhat similarly, attitudes toward prostitution routinely differ by gender, with women being more opposed to prostitution and its legalization than men. Women are more likely than men to believe that buying and selling sex is not justifiable, is morally wrong, and should be illegal or criminalized among samples in Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the U.K., the U.S., and a cross-cultural sample (Cao et al., 2017; Cao & Maguire, 2013; Chon, 2015; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Marist Institute, 2016; Morton et al., 2012; YouGov Poll, 2016).

Experimental research is less common but demonstrates that contextual factors also affect reactions to prostitution. For example, scenario studies demonstrate that stories about women forced into prostitution elicit greater moral outrage and empathy than stories about women freely choosing prostitution among samples of Spaniards and U.S. Americans (Bonache et al., 2021; Silver et al., 2015), suggesting that these contextual factors affect participant responses and demonstrating the importance of clearly defining prostitution when measuring reactions.

Overview of the Current Investigation

Much of the literature examining attitudes toward prostitution has (a) been descriptive, in that it focused on providing an estimate of countries' overall support or opposition to prostitution (e.g., studies using the World Values Survey such as Cao et al., 2017; Cao & Maquire, 2013; Marist Institute, 2016; YouGov, 2016), (b) identified worldviews, values systems, or individual differences that correlate with attitudes toward prostitution, as summarized above, or (c) theorized about the reason for opposition to or support for prostitution without explicitly testing those predictions (e.g., Kissil & Davey, 2010; Moen, 2014; Weitzer, 2024). In addition, (d) much work has been conducted in other cultures, (e.g., particularly in Asia; over 99,000 citations in Google Scholar for "attitudes toward prostitution in Asia"), and given cultural differences in norms, beliefs, value systems, and worldviews, findings may or may not apply to a U.S. sample. In contrast, the current investigation attempted to understand opposition to prostitution in a U.S. sample. Specifically, what reasons underlie opposition to prostitution, and if those reasons can be mitigated, what opposition remains, and why?

The current investigation sought to identify reasons for opposition to prostitution among a U.S. sample and to test the causal relationship of those beliefs on opposition to prostitution. As such, in Study 1, we qualitatively surveyed a U.S. sample's beliefs about prostitution to identify themes that could explain opposition to prostitution. Specifically, we sought to understand what U.S. adults believe prostitution entails. Then, using themes identified in Study 1, in Study 2, we experimentally examined whether opposition to prostitution is driven primarily by the negative themes assumed to co-occur with prostitution or if significant residual opposition to prostitution remains unexplained and requires further examination. Beyond experimentally examining whether negative confounding factors drive opposition to prostitution, in Study 2 we solicited participants' qualitative explanations for their responses to enable a further exploration of residual opposition to prostitution, particularly when harmful contextual factors are neutralized. Thus, our investigation in Study 2 enables an examination of attitudes toward prostitution in a "best case scenario," and even in the "best case scenario," what lingering opposition exists, and why.

Study 1

In Study 1 we sought to understand beliefs about prostitution among a U.S. sample. As such, we used a qualitative methodology in which participants generated their own thoughts about prostitution, which we then examined and coded for themes. Inviting participants to provide their own reactions, rather than to simply rate their

agreement with researcher-generated items, enables a fuller understanding of beliefs about prostitution and the identification of issues not previously acknowledged by researchers. The study was approved by the Saint Xavier University Institutional Review Board.

Method

Participants and Sampling

One hundred forty timeslots were posted to Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), restricting participation to participants with U.S. IP addresses, aged 18 and older, and with a 95% or higher approval rating. One hundred seventy-seven adults began and 152 completed most of the study in Qualtrics. However, we reviewed responses for possible evidence of fraudulent participants and omitted participants whose responses were copied from an online source or were otherwise unrelated to the prompt ($n = 36$; 24%), thus leaving 116 participants with usable data.

Accordingly, of the 116 participants included in analyses, 64 self-identified as cisgender male, 49 as cisgender female, 1 as transgender, and 1 as other. In addition, they predominantly identified as heterosexual (88%) with 10% bisexual, 2% gay/lesbian and 1% other. Participants were also predominately White (73%) with 11% Black/African American, 7% Hispanic/Latino, 4% Asian American, and 4% other. They reported a mean age of 36.19 years, ($SD = 11.31$, range 21 to 70), a median income of \$40,000–\$49,999 (range below \$20,000 to \$100,000–249,999), a median social class of middle class (range lower class to upper middle class), and a median education level of bachelor's degree (range high school diploma to graduate or professional degree). Additionally, seven participants indicated that they paid someone for sex and one participant indicated that they received money for sex.

Design and Procedure

Participants completed a series of demographic questions and reported up to ten thoughts about prostitution and were then thanked, debriefed, and paid. See the codebook at <https://osf.io/u893n/>.

Measures

Perceptions of Prostitution. Instructions stated, "On the following page, we will ask you to write down ten things you think of when you think of prostitution. Each unique thought should be on its own line. Full sentences are not necessary. If you run out of ideas, you do not have to fill all ten lines, but we appreciate you providing as many thoughts as possible. We appreciate your honest answers to each question. There are no right or wrong answers; simply write down what you truly and

personally associate with prostitution. It is incredibly important that you provide your honest response to each situation.” After the general instructions, participants were asked to “Please list ten things you think of when you think about prostitution. Write down the first things that come to mind.”

Coding. The first author and third author reviewed the responses, independently identified common themes, and collaborated to finalize and create operational definitions of the themes (see Online Supplemental Study 1 Codebook at <https://osf.io/u893n/>). We generated eleven themes including *cheating* (cheating on a significant other by either party), *desperation* (lack of alternative options, e.g., homeless), *drugs and alcohol* (use of or addiction to drugs or alcohol by either party), *enslavement* (forced into prostitution without consent, autonomy, or free will), *exploitation* (someone taking advantage of or financially profiting off the woman in prostitution), *immorality*, *legal status*, *physical abuse*, *pregnancy*, *STIs and disease*, and *trafficking* (sex or human trafficking, kidnapping). The first author trained the second author in coding by reviewing each operational definition and conducting independent practice coding rounds and comparing codes. The first and second authors subsequently independently coded each response for the presence (1 = present, 0 = absent) of each theme across comments. Across themes, inter-rater reliability was sufficient: Cohen’s κ s ranged .68-1.00. Discrepancies were then discussed and resolved.

Results

Perceptions of Prostitution

We conducted a chi-square goodness of fit test for each theme to determine whether the proportion of people generating each theme significantly differed from .01; the null hypothesis would articulate that the proportion of people generating each theme = .00 (i.e., that a particular belief does not exist). However, we substituted the null hypothesis proportion of .01 for .00 given that chi-square tests cannot test against a proportion of .00. Online Supplemental Table 1 at <https://osf.io/u893n/> fully summarizes the results. Common themes included *legal status* (47%), *physical abuse* (41%), *STIs and disease* (34%), *immorality* (29%), *desperation* (28%), *drugs and alcohol* (28%), *exploitation* (20%), *trafficking* (19%), *enslavement* (8%), and *cheating* (7%), the proportion of which all of which significantly differed from .01, $ps < .05$. Only *sexual abuse* (3%) and *pregnancy* (1%) did not significantly differ from .01, $ps > .09$.

Exploratory Analyses of Gender Differences

Given the consistent gender differences in the existing literature documenting women’s greater disapproval

TABLE 1		
Study 2’s Neutralized and Negative Factors Conditions, Separated by Theme		
Variable Manipulated	Neutralized Factors Condition	Negative Factors Condition
Opening description	An adult man and adult woman decide to arrange an exchange of sex for money. The woman agrees to provide sexual services for the man and the man agrees to pay the woman a previously decided monetary amount. [scenario continues using the text listed below, in the order listed below]	
Cheating	Both people are currently single and not in a romantic relationship.	Both people are currently in committed romantic relationships with other people which are presumed to be monogamous; neither person’s romantic partner knows about the sexual exchange.
Illegal	In this area, sex-for-money exchanges are fully legal between consenting adults, and this exchange was fully legal.	In this area, sex-for-money exchanges are completely illegal and this exchange was illegal.
Trafficking	The woman was not and is not being human trafficked, meaning that she was never kidnapped or forced to engage in sex-for-money exchanges against her will.	The woman was kidnapped and taken to a different location, far away from her home, and is forced to engage in sex-for-money exchanges against her will.
Enslavement	The woman voluntarily chose to engage in sexual exchanges for money with full autonomy and free will over all sexual exchanges.	The woman was forced to engage in sexual exchanges for money without choice, free will, or autonomy over the sexual exchanges.
Exploitation	The woman takes home all of the money from the exchange; she does not have to pay any portion of her earnings to anyone else.	The woman does not take home all of the money from the exchange; she has to pay a significant portion of her earnings to others.
Desperation	The woman is financially independent and financially secure, and is fully able to afford the lifestyle she desires.	The woman struggles to make ends meet financially, including obtaining stable access to housing, food, employment, transportation, etc.
Drugs & Alcohol	Use of drugs and alcohol or being under the influence of drugs or alcohol during the sexual exchange is strictly prohibited. Both parties need to pass a drug and alcohol test before entering into the sexual exchange. Neither person was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and neither person had ever used illegal drugs or illegally obtained prescription drugs.	Both parties were under the influence of drugs and alcohol, and the woman is currently dealing with drug addiction.
Physical Threat	Physical aggression is strictly prohibited and both parties have access to an alert system if they need help. Neither person used physical aggression toward the other person during the sexual exchange.	The man used physical aggression toward the woman during the sexual exchange.
STIs & Disease	Prior to the exchange, both parties are required to be tested for STIs and are required to come back “clean” with medical documentation. Neither the man nor the woman had any STIs or HIV/AIDS. Medical documentation was provided.	Neither party is required to be tested for STIs and HIV/AIDS.
Condom Misuse	Condoms are required to be used at all times and the man wore a condom during the entire sexual exchange.	Condoms are not required to be used and the man did not wear a condom during the sexual exchange.

toward prostitution relative to men (Cao et al., 2017; Cao & Maguire, 2013; Chon, 2015; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Marist Institute, 2016; Morton et al., 2012; YouGov Poll, 2016), we also explored whether men and women differed in their beliefs about prostitution by conducting a series of chi-square tests of independence for each of the themes. Interestingly, men and women did not differ in the themes generated, $ps > .09$. Online Supplemental Table 2 at <https://osf.io/u893n/> provides a full summary of the results.

Discussion

Asking participants to generate their own perceptions led to the discovery of *specific* perceptions about prostitution beyond measuring opposition to prostitution. Accordingly, in this study, we identified beliefs about prostitution among a U.S. sample, many of which held negative and harm-related connotations. Allowing participants to provide their own reasons for opposition enables a deeper examination of the factors driving opposition.

Overall, many of these themes embodied negative connotations, and many emphasized concerns about harm and fairness; all provide insights into perceptions of

prostitution and were used in Study 1 to examine whether these factors fully explain opposition to prostitution. Given the prominence of harm-related beliefs about prostitution, we wondered whether opposition to prostitution predominantly arises from opposition to the potentially harm-inflicting factors presumed to co-occur with prostitution more than from opposition to the exchange of sex for money. Specifically, if participants assume that prostitution causes harm, will they likely oppose prostitution scenarios that include harmful elements but not oppose prostitution scenarios in the absence of harm? Does the mitigation of harm eliminate opposition to prostitution, or do other factors nonetheless contribute to opposition to prostitution, and if so, what are the other contributing factors? We sought to answer these remaining questions in Study 2.

Study 2

In Study 1 we identified common perceptions of prostitution, many of which were negative and harm related. We extended these findings in Study 2 to examine whether opposition to prostitution, among a U.S. sample, stems specifically from opposition to the negative and harmful factors presumed to co-occur with prostitution, as identified in Study 1. Accordingly, we used a within-subjects experimental design to examine whether opposition to prostitution is primarily driven by negative and harmful confounding factors. Thus, participants were randomized to the order of conditions: one which included the negative confounding factors (cheating, condom misuse, desperation, drug and alcohol, enslavement, exploitation, illegality, physical threat, STIs and disease, and trafficking) and one which neutralized these factors. This enabled us to examine opposition to prostitution in the “worst case scenario” and “best case scenario” to determine whether the “best case scenario” would fully eliminate opposition or merely reduce opposition relative to the negative factors condition. Participants were also asked to provide reasons for their reactions in each scenario, which enabled an exploration of remaining reasons for residual opposition, if any, in the neutralized condition. The study was approved by the Saint Xavier University Institutional Review Board.

Method

Participants and Sampling

Two hundred timeslots were posted to Amazon Mechanical Turk. Respondents were limited to participants with U.S. IP addresses, aged 18 and older, and with a 95% or higher approval rating. Two hundred ninety-two adults began the study and 231 completed most of the study. However, we reviewed the open-ended reactions to the scenarios and omitted participants whose responses indicated poor quality, in that the response copied elements of the scenario, no

TABLE 2

Percent of Participants Generating Each Theme Between Conditions in Study 2

Theme	Negative Factors Condition	Neutralized Factors Condition	McNemar's Chi-Square Statistic Comparing Conditions	Odds Ratio
Cheating	42%***	1%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 60.12, p < .001$	8.11
Condom Misuse	32%***	1%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 44.18, p < .001$	5.42
Desperation	15%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 21.04, p < .001$	5.27
Drugs & Alcohol	36%***	2%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 46.45, p < .001$	4.18
Emotional Damage	7%***	3%*	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 3.27, p < .065$	1.92
Enslavement	60%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 89.01, p < .001$	9.58
Exploitation	39%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 57.02, p < .001$	7.94
Illegal	59%***	5%***	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 74.56, p < .001$	4.27
Immoral	24%***	11%***	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 11.43, p < .004$	1.83
Lack Romance	2%	3%**	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 0.17, p < .69$	0.74
Physical Threat	55%***	5%***	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 66.96, p < .001$	3.67
Pregnancy	6%***	2%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 2.50, p < .11$	1.83
Sexual Abuse	16%***	2%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 17.39, p < .001$	3.83
STIs & Disease	43%***	3%**	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 53.73, p < .001$	3.78
Trafficking	50%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 153) = 75.01, p < .001$	8.91

Note. The percentages indicate the percent of participants who generated each theme in each condition and were tested with the chi-square goodness fit test against a proportion of .01 to indicate whether a significant proportion of participants generated each theme.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

responses were provided in either scenario, or the responses were otherwise unrelated to the prompt ($n = 78$; 34%), thus leaving 153 participants with usable data.

Accordingly, of the 153 participants included in analyses, 81 self-identified as cisgender male, 70 as cisgender female, and 2 as transgender. They mostly identified as heterosexual (88%) with 9% bisexual and 3% gay/lesbian. In addition, the majority identified as White (81%) with 11% Black/African American, 3% Asian, 3% Hispanic/Latino, and 3% other. They reported a mean age of 36.80 years ($SD = 10.19$, range 21 to 68), a median income of \$50,000–\$74,999 (range below \$20,000 to \$100,000–249,999), a median social class of middle class (range lower class to upper middle class), and a median education level of bachelor's degree (range high school diploma to graduate or professional degree). In addition, twelve participants indicated that they paid someone for sex and one participant indicated that they received money for sex.

Design and Procedure

Participants first answered demographic questions and then were randomly assigned to the order of a prostitution scenario in which the negative confounding factors (derived from the Study 1) were present or neutralized. Participants then reported whether or not they opposed the scenario, reported up to ten reasons for their beliefs, re-read the scenario, rated their agreement with items assessing their perception of the presence or absence of each of the negative factors (i.e., the manipulation check; items randomized), and lastly rated the extent of their opposition to the scenario (items randomized). They were then thanked, debriefed, and paid. (See Online Supplemental Study 2 Codebook at <https://osf.io/u893n/>)

Experimental Manipulation. Participants were presented with prostitution scenarios describing an interaction between a woman (seller) and man (buyer) who exchanged sex for money. The scenarios either included or neutralized the negative factors identified in Study 1. Table 1 provides the language for the negative and neutralized factors conditions separated by theme.

Negative Factors Condition. The negative factors condition included the themes generated in Study 1 to create a prostitution scenario with those themes present. Those themes included *cheating*, *condom misuse*, *desperation*, *drug and alcohol*, *enslavement*, *exploitation*, *illegal*, *physical threat*, *STIs and disease*, and *trafficking*. For example, we included the *trafficking* theme by explicitly stating that the woman was being trafficked: “The woman was kidnapped and taken to a different location, far away from her home, and is forced to engage in sex-for-money exchanges against her will.”

Neutralized Factors Condition. In the neutralized

factors condition, we attempted to mitigate the negative factors presumed to co-occur with prostitution situations. For example, we neutralized the theme of *trafficking* by explicitly stating that the woman was not being trafficked: “The woman was not and is not being human trafficked, meaning that she was never kidnapped or forced to engage in sex-for-money exchanges against her will.”

Dependent Measures

Manipulation Checks. To confirm that the negative factors condition sufficiently portrayed cheating, condom misuse, desperation, drug and alcohol, enslavement, exploitation, illegal, physical threat, STIs and disease, and trafficking relative to the neutralized condition, participants rated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) with items measuring the extent of the presence of each theme in each scenario (see Online Supplemental Study 2 Codebook). These themes included: *cheating* (by either party), *condom misuse* (lack of condom use), *desperation* (engaging in a sex-for-money exchange out of financial need), *drug and alcohol use*, *enslavement* (lack of autonomy), *exploitation* (third party profiting off the exchange), *illegal*, *physical abuse*, *STIs and disease* (risk of STI or disease transmission), and *trafficking*. To measure the absence or presence of these factors, participants rated their agreement on 2–4 items measuring each construct. Inter-item reliabilities were sufficient for constructs in both conditions: Cronbach's α s ranged .67–.92² across item sets and conditions.

Opposition. To examine whether the negative factors and their neutralization affected opposition, participants reported their opposition/support for each scenario in two ways. To mimic polling measures and to align with some previous research using dichotomized assessments, one measure simply asked “are you opposed to the above scenario” with the options “yes” or “no.” To also assess variance in attitudes, participants rated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) across four items: “I [support/oppose/approve of/disapprove of] the above scenario.” The positive items were reverse-scored and the items were then combined to create a composite score based on a mean of the four items. Inter-item reliability indicated sufficient reliability in both the negative factors and neutralized factors conditions (Cronbach's α s ranged .87–.94).

²Because inter-item reliability for the desperation item set was fair in the neutralized factors condition ($\alpha = .75$) but poor for the negative factors condition ($\alpha = .51$), the authors eliminated two out of three items and instead used a single-item measure that the authors perceived to have the highest face validity. In addition, the inter-item reliability for one item in the trafficking item set was fair in the neutralized condition ($\alpha = .76$) but was poor in the negative factors condition ($\alpha = .66$) and thus was dropped. The full set of original and final items is available in the Online Supplement Study 2 Codebook.

Reasons for Opposition. To enable a further examination of the reasons for opposition, participants reported up to ten reasons why they opposed or did not oppose each scenario. The first author and third author reviewed the responses, independently identified common themes, and collaborated to finalize and create operational definitions of the themes. We created operational definitions for each theme (see Online Supplemental Study 2 Codebook at <https://osf.io/u893n/>). The fourteen themes generated include *cheating, condom misuse, desperation, drugs and alcohol, emotional damage* (potential or experienced psychological, mental, or emotional harm), *enslavement, exploitation, illegal, immoral, lack of romance* (lack of emotional or romantic connection), *physical threat, pregnancy, sexual abuse, STIs and disease, and trafficking*. After developing the themes, the first and second authors independently coded each individual response for the presence (1 = presence, 0 = absence) of each theme. Inter-rater reliability was sufficient for the neutral and negative factors conditions, Cohen's κ s ranged .67–1.00. Discrepancies were then discussed and resolved.

Results

Manipulation Checks

To confirm the efficacy of the manipulation, we conducted a two-factor within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) examining the effect of condition on the different belief sets and using the belief sets as an additional within-subjects factor. We specifically focused on the main effect of condition across belief sets, and the simple main effect of condition within belief sets. The main effect of condition was significant [$F(1, 148) = 485.56, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .77$] such that the negative factors condition increased negative beliefs ($M = 6.16, SD = 1.11, 95\% CI[6.00, 6.35]$) relative to the neutralized condition ($M = 2.30, SD = 1.20, 95\% CI[2.10, 2.49]$). Furthermore, the simple main effect tests revealed that this pattern was consistent for all belief sets, $ps < .001, \eta_p^2$ s ranging from .11 to .76. Relative to the negative factors condition, participants in the neutralized condition were less likely to believe that cheating occurred, the exchange was illegal, sex trafficking occurred, the woman was enslaved, the woman was exploited, the woman was desperate, the woman was using or addicted to drugs or alcohol, physical abuse occurred, STIs and diseases were spread, and condoms were not used, thus suggesting the manipulation effectively neutralized the proposed negative factors. Importantly, however, although the neutralized condition significantly reduced the negative beliefs relative to the negative factors condition, participants' endorsement of those beliefs in the neutralized condition were nonetheless above the lowest point on the scale. In other words, although the manipulation effectively *reduced* those beliefs, it did not, on average, *eliminate* those beliefs. Online Supplemental Table 3 at <https://osf.io/u893n/> fully summarizes the results.

Opposition

We examined opposition to prostitution in two ways: comparing the proportion of people opposed to the prostitution scenario in each condition using a McNemar chi-square test and comparing the extent of opposition to the prostitution scenario in each condition using a paired samples t test. The proportion of adults who opposed the prostitution exchange scenario significantly differed between the two scenarios: A greater proportion of adults opposed the prostitution scenario in the negative factors condition (95%) relative to the neutralized condition (19%). Specifically, 116 (76%) were opposed in the negative condition but changed to unopposed in the neutralized condition, 29 (19%) participants remained opposed in both scenarios, 7 (5%) remained unopposed in both scenarios, and 0 (0%) were opposed in the neutral condition but unopposed in the negative condition, $\chi^2(1, n = 152) = 114.01, p < .001, OR^3 = 10.65$.

³Formula for a within-subjects binary 2 by 2 odds ratio provided by David B. Wilson (personal communication, January 1, 2021).

TABLE 3

Comparisons of Themes Generated Between Participants Who Opposed Versus Did Not Oppose Prostitution in the Neutralized Scenario in Study 2

Theme	% Among Opposed	% Among Not Opposed	Chi-Square Test of Independence Statistic Comparing Conditions
Cheating	7%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 9.23, p = .002, V = .25$
Condom Misuse	3%	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 4.59, p = .032, V = .18$
Desperation	0%	0%	+
Drugs & Alcohol	10%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 9.23, p = .002, V = .25$
Emotional Damage	14%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 18.72, p = .001, V = .35$
Enslavement	0%	0%	+
Exploitation	0%	0%	+
Illegal	28%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 38.50, p = .001, V = .51$
Immoral	52%***	1%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 69.63, p = .001, V = .68$
Lack Romance	17%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 23.56, p = .001, V = .4$
Physical Threat	24%***	1%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 18.07, p = .001, V = .35$
Pregnancy	10%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 13.95, p = .001, V = .31$
Sexual Abuse	10%***	0%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 4.59, p = .032, V = .18$
STIs & Disease	14%***	1%	$\chi^2 = (1, n = 150) = 9.05, p = .003, V = .2$
Trafficking	0%	0%	+

Note. The percentages indicate the percent of participants who generated each theme in the neutralized condition between those who opposed and did not oppose prostitution were tested with the chi-square goodness fit test against a proportion of .01 to indicate whether a significant proportion of participants generated each theme.

+ an insufficient number of cases to test

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Likewise, the extent of opposition differed such that participants were more opposed to prostitution in the negative factors condition ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 1.06$) than the neutralized factors condition ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.72$); $M_D = -3.88$, $SD_D = 2.20$, 95% CI[-4.23, -3.53], $t(152) = 21.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.76$.

Reasons for Opposition

As a second examination of whether the presence of negative factors changed beliefs about prostitution, we conducted a series of McNemar chi-square tests to compare the proportion of people qualitatively generating each theme between the negative factors and neutralized conditions. Table 2 summarizes the results. A significantly larger proportion of people in the negative factors condition, relative to the neutralized condition, generated themes about *enslavement* (60% vs. 0%), *trafficking* (50% vs. 0%), *cheating* (42% vs. 1%), *exploitation* (39% vs. 0%), *condom misuse* (32% vs. 1%), *desperation* (15% vs. 0%), *illegal* (59% vs. 5%), *drugs and alcohol* (36% vs. 2%), *sexual abuse* (16% vs. 2%), *STIs and disease* (43% vs. 3%), *physical threat* (55% vs. 5%), and *immorality* (24% vs. 11%), and with odds ratios ranging 1.83 to 9.58. Interestingly, an equivalent proportion of people in both conditions commented on *emotional damage* (7% vs. 3%), *pregnancy* (6% vs. 2%) and the *lack of romance and intimacy* (2% versus 3%).

Exploratory Follow-Up Analyses

Examining Gender Differences. To examine gender differences in the continuous measure of opposition, we ran a 2 (gender; between-subjects) by 2 (condition; within-subjects) mixed ANOVA on opposition among cisgender participants.⁴ Across conditions, women ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.86$, 95% CI[4.55, 4.96]) were more strongly opposed than men ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.86$, 95% CI[4.02, 4.40]), $F(1, 149) = 14.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, and gender did not significantly interact with condition, $F(1, 148) = 1.53$, $p = .22$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, with simple effect tests of gender within each condition revealing women's elevated opposition relative to men's (negative condition: women: $M = 6.61$, $SD = 0.90$, 95% CI[6.37, 6.85], men: $M = 6.28$, $SD = 1.12$, 95% CI[6.06, 6.51]; neutralized condition: women: $M = 2.90$, $SD = 2.00$, 95% CI[2.51, 3.30], men: $M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.32$, 95% CI[1.77, 2.51]), $p_s \leq .05$. No similar analysis exists for the categorical outcome variable, so we instead ran two chi-square tests of independence examining gender differences in opposition in the negative and neutralized conditions. Equivalent proportions of men and women opposed the neutral scenario (16% of men, 20% of women), $\chi^2(1, 150) = 0.45$,

⁴It is unclear whether "gender" differences might be primarily driven by sex or gender so the authors used "both" by running analyses with cisgender participants.

$p = .50$, $V = .06$, as well as the negative factors scenario (94% of men, 97% of women), $\chi^2(1, 151) = 0.93$, $p = .33$, $V = .08$. We also examined gender differences in reasons for opposition within the neutralized and negative conditions. Online Supplemental Table 4 at <https://osf.io/u893n/> summarizes the full results. In the neutral condition, women were more likely to mention immorality (17%) than men (5%), $\chi^2(1, 151) = 5.90$, $p = .015$, $V = .20$; no other gender differences emerged, $p_s > .09$.

Examining Residual Opposition. Although neutralizing the negative co-occurring factors decreased opposition to prostitution from 95% opposition to 19%, a fair amount of people still opposed prostitution in the neutralized condition. We examined possible reasons for the residual opposition in the neutralized condition by examining the differences in reasons (i.e., themes) generated between opposed and unopposed participants using a series of chi-square test of independence tests. Table 3 summarizes the differences in reasons generated between opposed and unopposed participants in the neutralized condition. Some of the strongest differences between opposed and unopposed participants were elements that were not mitigated between conditions: *immorality* (52% vs. 1%), in particular, as well as *lack of emotional or romantic connection* (17% vs. 0%), *pregnancy* (10% vs. 0%), *emotional damage* (14% vs. 0%), and *sexual assault* (10% vs. 0%). Additionally, opposed participants were more likely to raise concerns about *illegality* (28% vs. 0%), *physical harm* (24% vs. 1%), *drug and alcohol use* (10% vs. 0%), *STI and disease transmission* (14% vs. 1%), *cheating* (7% vs. 0%), and *lack of condoms* (3% vs. 0%). They did not differ in mentioning *desperation* (0% vs. 0%), *enslavement* (0% vs. 0%), *exploitation* (0% vs. 0%), or *trafficking* (0% vs. 0%).

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that opposition to prostitution, among this sample of U.S. Americans, is primarily due to the negative associated factors. Thus, these participants oppose prostitution when prostitution participants are under the influence of drugs and alcohol; the interaction is illegal, contributes to relationship cheating, transmits infections and disease, and involves unsafe sexual practices; and the woman is trafficked, enslaved, financially desperate, and exploited. Interestingly, participants also mentioned additional concerns, which were not explicitly neutralized, including that the exchange lacked an emotional connection, could enable sexual assault, could produce an unplanned pregnancy, and could cause emotional harm. The prevalence of those themes was greater in the negative factors condition relative to the neutralized condition, with the exception of lacking a romantic connection, emotional damage,

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and potential for unwanted pregnancy, which did not differ in prevalence between conditions.

General Discussion

Beliefs About Prostitution: Study 1

The findings from Study 1 revealed that associations with prostitution were predominantly negative. These include assumptions that prostitutes are enslaved, exploited, abused, and trafficked and that participants involved in prostitution are cheating, spreading infections and diseases, and misusing drugs and alcohol. Participants also commented that prostitution is illegal and immoral. These findings are generally consistent with other research measuring undergraduate students' beliefs about prostitution in Canada, which includes similar themes such as risks to health, physical abuse, drug usage, illegality, and low socioeconomic status (Morton et al., 2012). In addition, the current approach enabled the discovery of the additional themes of trafficking and cheating, thus extending the current literature.

What Explains Opposition to Prostitution? Study 2

In Study 2 we used the negative themes from Study 1 to create two prostitution scenarios, one with the negative factors included and one with the negative factors neutralized, to determine whether those negative factors were the primary drivers of opposition to prostitution. Results confirmed that the negative contextual factors are primary drivers of opposition to prostitution, as indicated by a large reduction in opposition in the neutralized condition. This is consistent with other experimental investigations, which have shown that scenarios depicting women being forced into prostitution increase moral opposition (Bonache et al., 2021; Silver et al., 2015). However, a fair proportion of the sample nonetheless opposed prostitution even with those negative factors neutralized. Examining these participants' reasons for their answers revealed five themes for which a fair proportion of participants still noted in the neutralized condition: physical threat, STIs and disease, illegality, emotional damage, lack of intimate connection, and immorality.

Gender Differences

In addition, and consistent with previous investigations (e.g., Cao et al., 2017; Cao & Maguire, 2013; Chon, 2015; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Marist Institute, 2016; Morton et al., 2012; YouGov Poll, 2016), women were more likely to be opposed to prostitution than men in both conditions in Study 2. Further, women were more likely to state that prostitution is immoral even in the neutralized condition in Study 2.

Limitations and Future Directions

One potential limitation of Study 2 was that it manipulated the presence of multiple negative factors concurrently. This prevents one from understanding exactly which factors drive opposition toward prostitution. It is also possible that real-life prostitution scenarios do not necessarily include all negative factors concurrently. However, the presence of these factors seems to be consistent with real-world descriptions of prostitution (Preble et al., 2019; Shaver et al., 2011). In addition, in Study 1 we collected lay peoples' concerns about what they believe occurs in prostitution exchanges and used these concerns in the manipulation in Study 2. Therefore, we believe this to be a strength in enhancing external validity by including all possible negative factors and mitigating any potential confounding risk. However, future research could contrast the effects of each of the negative factors individually to determine if one particular factor drives opposition. For example, future studies could use our neutralized condition and manipulate only one of the negative factors in a condition across several conditions to determine if any of the negative factors we concurrently manipulated did not, in fact, increase opposition to the prostitution scenario or to compare the magnitude of the effect of the particular elements.

Along similar lines, was the neutralized condition unrepresentative of real-world prostitution scenarios, and therefore limited external validity? Although it is possible that real-life prostitution exchanges might not include all of these safety precautions, the neutralized condition nonetheless parallels those utilized in real places where prostitution is legal (Brents & Hausbeck, 2005). For instance, Nevada brothels implement a multitude of safety precautions, such as panic buttons, audio monitoring, required condom use for all sexual acts, knowledge of where the women in prostitution are, and required weekly STI checks for the women in prostitution (Brents & Hausbeck, 2005), thus suggesting that some of the mitigations within the neutralized scenario were, in fact, realistic.

In Study 2 we found that average opposition to the prostitution exchange in the neutralized condition ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.72$, on a scale of 1 to 7) was similar to U.S. adult's ratings on prostitution justifiability on the World Values Survey ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 2.70$, on a scale of 1 to 10) in 2017 (Haerpfer et al., 2021). This could suggest that the manipulation artificially inflated opposition to prostitution in the negative factors condition and that the prostitution exchange in the neutralized condition represents what some U.S. Americans believe prostitution exchanges look like. However, in using the beliefs generated in Study 1 as the foundation for the scenarios in Study 2 eliminates this potential limitation, we thus ensured that

the negative factors scenario was representative of beliefs about prostitution. Also, previous survey measures did not define specific instances of prostitution, meaning that participants rated opposition to prostitution as defined by their own heuristics and beliefs about prostitution rather than as defined by the researcher. The results of the current study suggest that the sample of U.S. adults predominantly opposes prostitution due to the negative confounding factors, whereas future research could examine the role of immorality in maintaining opposition to otherwise harm-reduced prostitution.

Sample Validity

Early research heralded the use of Amazon Mechanical Turk as a low-cost way of amassing large online samples (e.g., Buhrmester et al. 2011). Among other strengths, MTurk is more diverse than college student samples and provides a better (although not representative) sample of adults (e.g., Buhrmester et al. 2011). Recently, however, the quality of MTurkers decreased substantially, with researchers noting, for example, that “starting in summer 2018, social media and online discussions emerged expressing concerns about bots (i.e., computer programs that automatically complete HITs) and/or farmers (i.e., individuals using server farms to bypass MTurk location restrictions) on MTurk” (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020, p. 464), particularly as noted in unusual open-ended responses (see Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020). Longitudinal studies documented an increase in poor-quality respondents around 2018 (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020). Of note, however, poor-quality online respondents are not limited to Amazon Mechanical Turk (e.g., Salinas, 2023).

The authors excluded from analyses participants identified as poor responders, and as such, believe the results reflect results obtained from primarily non-fraudulent participants and are thus valid. First, the currently used exclusion practices are in line with current recommendations. In the authors’ exclusion review, what the authors independently suspected indicated fraud is consistent with recommendations made by others (e.g., see Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020). Furthermore, the percentage of flagged responses in the current studies is consistent with longitudinal research examining MTurk response quality at about the same time (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020). In addition, the use of a within-subjects design minimizes the potential for differential attrition between conditions to introduce confounds (e.g., see Zhou & Fishbach, 2016). Lastly, excluding the perceived fraudulent data had a very small impact on the results. The pattern of the results was largely unchanged, with the exception of strengthening and sharpening effects, which can happen when the identified poor responders’

responses are mostly random responding and therefore primarily add unsystematic error variance, which serves to dilute the systematic variance of the overall effects.

As such, with the exclusion of poor responders, with identification practices consistent with professional recommendations, and with the exclusion only exerting a minor effect on the results, the authors are confident in the validity of the results for a sample of American adults. That the current results are similar to other similar investigations conducted with different sampling techniques (e.g., Bonache et al., 2021; Haerpfer et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2012; Silver et al., 2015) adds further support in the validity of the current findings.

Why Is Prostitution “Immoral?”

Theoretical Implications

Prostitution seems to be a “moral” issue. Beliefs about prostitution seem to primarily include concerns of harm (Study 1) and opposition to prostitution seems to primarily (but not exclusively) be in response to harm (Study 2). Wanting to minimize harm to others is seemingly a common “moral” belief, at least according to moral foundations theory (e.g., Graham et al., 2013). A large component of opposition to prostitution, as evinced in the current studies, is the perception of potential for harm. And yet, a sizable proportion of people were still opposed to prostitution, even in the neutralized condition, in which harm was largely mitigated.

The issue of “morality” was not explicitly mitigated in the neutralized condition. (How could researchers make prostitution “moral?”) This was the largest concern expressed, particularly among those opposed to prostitution in the neutralized condition. Future research examining attitudes toward prostitution should focus specifically on understanding the “morality” of prostitution.

Large drivers of the moral opposition to prostitution among U.S. Americans, we suspect, could be due to religious definitions of and restrictions surrounding sex and the consequential imbuing of sex with moral importance. For example, marriage (including its sexual consummation) is a sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church and is a sacred institution or holy ordinance of God in the Protestant churches (with Christians the most common religious identity among U.S. Americans at 68%; Gallup, 2024). As such, for some, the act of sexual intercourse is one with deep spiritual meaning and is reserved as a holy act to be performed only within marriage. Exchanging sex for money would violate the religious “holy act” or sacrament of marriage. In support of the idea that opposition to prostitution could stem from beliefs that prostitution violates religious morals, as religiosity in America has decreased (e.g., Pew Research

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Center, 2022), opposition to prostitution has similarly decreased (e.g., Cao & Maguire, 2013).

In trying to understand residual opposition in the neutralized condition, radical feminist theories suggest that, under patriarchal conditions, women are never truly fully sexually empowered (e.g., Gerassi, 2015). Furthermore, for a phenomenon in which there is a common sex-specific dynamic, in which one sex (male) typically pays for a service typically provided by the other sex (female), and the reverse situation (women paying men for sex) is rarer; again, some might believe that women are never fully sexually empowered. In other words, in exchanges like prostitution, this logic might argue that women are always being taken advantage of, and these exchanges are never truly “fair” because the goods the woman provides (sex) is invaluable and cannot truly ever be fairly commodified by money. And thus, this situation is always exploitative and cannot ever truly be “fair.”

In a similar vein, some of that residual opposition might be due to the sex-specific nature of the arrangement of women selling sex and men buying sex, which could be perceived as inherently exploitative. For example, men’s greater average physical size and upper body strength makes it easier for them, on average, to physically and sexually assault women, and women, not men, risk bearing an unwanted pregnancy. However, other sex-specific pairs in prostitution exist. Arrangements in which women purchase sex from men would not negate that the male seller, given average sex differences in size and strength, could more easily physically and sexually assault the woman, or that the woman could incur an unwanted pregnancy, and so some U.S. Americans might nonetheless be somewhat opposed to that transaction. However, because men are the sellers and women are the buyers, there might be reduced perceptions that the transaction is exploitative. For male-male and female-female prostitution, there is no risk of unwanted pregnancy, nor is there necessarily an average size and strength difference between the buyer and seller. As such, some U.S. Americans might be even less opposed to that form of transactional sex. Examining the reactions to other sex-specific dynamics in prostitution provides an interesting avenue for future research.

Conclusion

The existing literature lacks an understanding of the reasons for which U.S. samples oppose prostitution, aside from individual difference and worldview predictors of opposition. The present studies offer an initial investigation into addressing this shortcoming. Results from these studies identified respondent-generated beliefs about prostitution, which were primarily negative, and these negative perceptions of prostitution,

particularly perceptions of harm toward prostitutes, partially explained opposition toward prostitution. Unexplained residual opposition seemed to revolve around a more diffuse concept of “morality,” which the discussion sought to unpack. Ambivalence toward prostitution, among some U.S. Americans, might reflect two different issues: a desire to reduce harm toward people (particularly women) in prostitution, while nonetheless remaining morally opposed to prostitution. This research helps continue the discussion.

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Author Note

Angela G. Pirlott  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9262-2530>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Angela Pirlott, Saint Xavier University, Department of Psychology, 3700 W. 103rd St., Chicago, IL, 60655, USA.

Email: pirlott@sxu.edu

Correction to Abrams et al. (2026)

Regarding the article, "Perceptions of Sex Work: What Drives Opposition?" by Tiffany R. Abrams, Lauren M. Banicki, and Amanda G. Pirlott (*Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, 2025, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 391-402. <https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN30.4.391>), the authors have corrected terminology throughout the manuscript, including in the article's title and abstract. Specifically, the term "sex work" has been replaced with "prostitution" to accurately reflect the original materials used in the study.

The corrected version of the article, "Perceptions of Prostitution: What Drives Opposition?" is now available on the *Psi Chi Journal* website and should be used in all citations and references moving forward.

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