



# Behind the Research: Why Sex Workers should Participate, and how they can do so Safely

Spokes Hub

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# Who am I?

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## **Head of Activism and Community Engagement at le Shaw Student and Teacher**

- Honours Bachelors in Psychology (Concordia University)
- Masters in Women's and Gender Studies (Carleton University)
- PhD Candidate in Law and Legal Studies (Carleton University)

## **Academic Researcher**

- Intersection of commercial sex and robot technology
- Experiences of sexual pleasure
- Management of Canadian sex offender registry

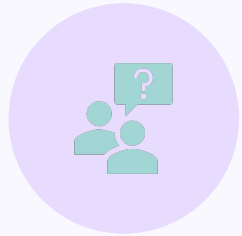
## **Research Participant!**

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# Course Plan



WHY PARTICIPATE  
IN RESEARCH?



RISKS AND  
BENEFITS



MAIN TYPES OF  
RESEARCH



THE ETHICAL  
RESEARCH  
PROCESS



HOW TO PROTECT  
YOURSELF

# Why Participate in Research?

People involved in the sex trade have been historically excluded from research, legal and policy decisions, and debates that concern them, exacerbating their oppression.

Participating is one way to have your voice heard and can be a compliment to advocacy and activist work.



# GOOD research *can*


- Promote advocacy and policy change
- Help improve services
- Fight against stigma and stereotypes
- Promote community building
- Contribute to historical documentation/archiving of sex worker lives and experiences

*Even good research can be misinterpreted and/or misused by the media, government, policy makers and anti-sex work campaigners*





# **BAD research *can***

- Misrepresent participants
  - Deliberately create outcomes that support the criminalization of sex work
  - Some research can create conflict within the sex worker community
  - Abuse of sex workers' time and energy
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## Benefits of Participating in Research

- Learn more about yourself, introspective activity
- Learn about specific topic
- Learn about the research process
- Contribute to society/ research/your community
- Form of activism
- Access to findings (in some cases)



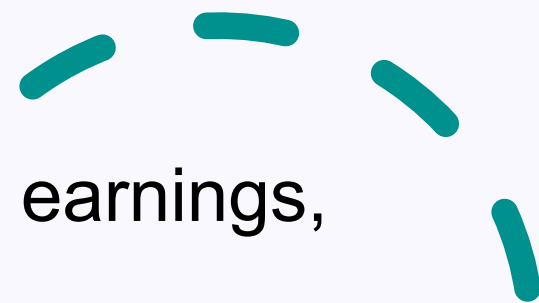
# Potential Benefits?

- Financial compensation
- Other benefits (treatment, free resources, course, etc.)





# Risks of Participating in Research?

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- Loss of time, potential earnings, energy
  - Responding to questions could cause discomfort, and in some instances could be triggering
  - Stigma
  - Confidentiality breaches

# Main Types of Research

## Quantitative:

- Surveys & Questionnaires: Collect structured data from large groups.
- Experiments: Test cause-and-effect relationships under controlled conditions.
- Longitudinal Studies: Track participants over time to observe changes.
- Cross-Sectional Studies: Examine different groups at a single point in time.

## Qualitative:

- Interviews: One-on-one discussions to explore personal experiences.
- Focus Groups: Group discussions to gather diverse perspectives.
- Ethnography: Researchers observe and engage with a community over time.
- Case Studies: In-depth analysis of individuals or specific events.

# Surveys

- Typically done online
- Offer anonymity and privacy
- Can be less effortful or time consuming (but some can be long)
- Can be less emotionally demanding
- Less personal connection
- Little opportunity to explain your answers and experiences
- “Just a number”



# Interviews

- Can be in person but now increasingly done online over video platform (e.g. Zoom)
- More personal
- Can feel more involved in the research process
- Can feel more empowering
- More opportunity to explain your answers and experiences, a chance to tell your story
- Time consuming, typically at least 60+ minutes
- Can be emotionally draining
- Requires vulnerability
- Though anonymous in terms of the data, you are exposing yourself to the researcher



# Research Ethics Boards (REB, IRB)

- Committee that reviews research studies to ensure they are ethical, safe, and respectful to participants
- Made of of various experts and sometimes community members
- Aims to protect participants from harm, coercion, and exploitation
- Ensures that research follows ethical principles like informed consent, privacy, and minimizing risk
- Can do investigations into projects that might not be following ethical principles
- Not all research projects go through REB review (though they are supposed to)! Some scam journals do not check or care

# Ethics Process

- Researcher submits study to the REB:
  - Document detailing all of their study and answering numerous questions about ethics
  - All related documents:
    - Interview guide
    - Consent form
    - Surveys
    - Email communication
    - Recruitment materials
- REB sends comments back to the researcher
- Researcher must then submit response
- This back and forth can happen multiple times until the board agrees that ethical compliance has been met and gives the researcher an approval
- Only then can the researcher begin their research
- If the researcher makes any changes, they have to resubmit to the ethics board

# Consent Form

Document that explains the research study and ensures you understand your rights before agreeing to participate.

All ethical studies must have participants read and “sign” consent form.

Depending on the study, “signing” could mean full signature, initials, or even recorded verbal consent.

# Consent Form

## Typically includes:

- Purpose of the study
- What you will be asked to do
- Potential risks & benefits
- Confidentiality protection
- Voluntary participation
- Right to withdraw
- Contact information
- Proof of REB review
- Resources





# Consent Form



- If the study has no consent form, it is not an (ethical) research study!
- Make sure to fully read the consent form at least once.
- Consent forms can be long, repetitive, and jargony. Don't hesitate to ask the researcher for clarifications or review the consent form with a person you trust.

# Consent Form



- Interviews

- For online interviews, sent by email ahead of interview.
- For in-person, given ahead of interview or at time of interview.
- A good researcher will go through the consent form with you, even if you have already sent a signed copy. This will give you a chance to ask questions.

- Survey

- Usually “signed” online.
- Contact email to send questions to.
- If you have questions, email the researcher before continuing with participation.

# Consent Form



- If you are not comfortable signing your full name on the form, ask about other options, such as signing with initials or verbal consent.
- Even if you sign the consent form, you can change your mind about participation any time during the study.



A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is sitting at a desk in an office. He is looking intently at a laptop screen. His right hand is raised to his forehead, holding his black-rimmed glasses. The background is slightly blurred, showing another person in a blue shirt and a modern office environment with a lamp and framed pictures on the wall. The overall lighting is soft and professional.

# Consent Form

Let's look at some typical consent form language and break it down!

# Consent Form Language

*“You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation may allow researchers and the broader community to better understand sex workers’ perspectives on robot technologies and commercial sex. Findings from the study will be developed into a report to be distributed to participants and to sex work organizations.”*

Even though this study offers compensation, it does not make claims of benefits! Compensation is not considered a benefit, because it is minimal and more so a token of appreciation than payment or a benefit.

# Consent Form Language

*We will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed.*

*All data will be kept confidential, unless release is required by law because of disclosure of harm or potential harm to a minor, harm or potential harm to self or others.*

- People recognizing content
- Someone steals the USB key
- Investigation by REB
- Release required by law, court order, data breach

# How can I Protect Myself?

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Ask questions:

- Why did the researcher decide to study this topic?
- What is the researcher's experience with sex work?
- Ask for copies of other work they have done on this topic (published articles, thesis/dissertation, even a class paper). You can ask for a simplified explanation if you find it hard to understand. If they are a junior student, you can also ask for their supervisors' work.
- How is the study funded?



# How can I Protect Myself?

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Ask for options:

- Different options for interview (video platform, phone, etc.)
- Audio recording only
- No recording (not always possible but some might be ok with it)
- Ask to review transcripts
- Signing consent form with initials only, or only providing oral consent





# Signs of an Ethical Researcher

- Makes clear their stance on sex work in recruitment
- Is transparent and responds to questions openly
- Gives numerous options to participants
- Does not pressure you to participate
- Takes extra care to protect participants.
  - Does not do personal reach out to individuals
  - Does not agree to interview people they know well
  - Does not pressure people/organizations to share recruitment materials
  - Directs interested participants to email them at university email, no communications on social media platforms (shows they are careful about revealing your identity)
  - Goes through consent form with you
  - Reminds you (almost to an annoying point) that participation is voluntary and that you can refuse to answer any question
  - Intends to share findings with participants and organizations

# Study Participation Checklist

- ✓ Has the study been approved by an Ethics Review Board?
- ✓ Does the study have a consent form?
  - ✓ Am I allowed to withdraw from the study?
  - ✓ Is the researcher taking measures to protect my identity?
  - ✓ Is the research realistic about benefits? (promising too many benefits, or large sums of money, can be a red flag).
- ✓ What is the researcher's approach to sex work?
  - ✓ Does the researcher(s) belong to the sex work community or have a rapport with sex work communities?
  - ✓ Has the research been developed with a sex worker consultant or sex work NGO? (this should be indicated on materials) Also look for terms like "peer-led research", "community-based research", "participatory action research"
  - ✓ Where did the invitation come from?
  - ✓ What language are they using? (prostitution vs sex work)
  - ✓ What other works have they, or their supervisors published on the topic of sex work and/or sexuality?
  - ✓ Do they explain their stance in advertisement materials/invitations/consent form?
- ✓ What is my main motivation for participating in this study? Is it more than just financial?
- ✓ What are the risks? What are the benefits? How do these balance out?
- ✓ How do I feel? I should feel curious, interested, comfortable. How do I vibe with the researcher? Trust the vibe and trust your feelings.

**It's ok to say no or to change your mind!**