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# The Paradox of Pleasure and Protection: A Theoretical Exploration of Sex, Condom Use and Human Flourishing

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the complex relationships between sex, condom use, and human flourishing; challenging the conventional wisdom that condom use undermines sexual pleasure and intimacy. Drawing on existential and feminist theories, we argue that condoms can empower individuals to navigate the paradox of pleasure and protection, fostering a sense of autonomy, agency, and well-being. We propose a framework that integrates three interconnected concepts: (1) embodied subjectivity, highlighting the intricate relationships between bodily experiences, emotions, and desires; (2) relational ethics, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect, trust, and communication in sexual encounters; and (3) ontological security, exploring the ways in which condom use can provide a sense of safety and security, enabling individuals to engage in sexual activities with greater confidence and pleasure. These three pillars form an integrated system wherein embodied awareness enables ethical relating, which in turn generates ontological security. Thus, creating a cycle that enhances sexual flourishing. While this work is theoretically generalizable across cultural contexts, we illustrate its application through the Nigerian context, where cultural misconceptions about condom use remain particularly salient despite high rates of sexually transmitted infections. We argue that condom use can be a powerful tool for promoting sexual health, autonomy, and human flourishing, and should be celebrated as a responsible and empowered choice.

*Key words:* pleasure, protection sex, condom use, human flourishing.

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## Novelty and Significance

*What is already known about the topic?*

- Condom use is widely recognized as effective for STI/HIV prevention, yet resistance persists due to beliefs that condoms reduce sexual pleasure and intimacy.
- Existential and feminist theories have independently addressed sexual autonomy, agency, and relational dynamics in sexual health contexts.
- Previous studies showed that psychological factors can influence sexual satisfaction, but these insights remain disconnected from comprehensive theoretical frameworks.

*What this paper adds?*

- Develops the first integrated theoretical framework combining embodied subjectivity, relational ethics, and ontological security to demonstrate how condom use can enhance rather than diminish sexual flourishing.
- Shows how these three pillars function as a dynamic, self-reinforcing system (not parallel concepts), creating a virtuous cycle that resolves the pleasure-protection paradox.
- Provides a novel application demonstrating how universal theoretical principles can illuminate culturally specific sexual health challenges, using Nigeria as an illustrative case study.

Outside of academia, there has been a hot discussion surrounding condom usage and its impact on sexual pleasure. This discussion is not uncommon in beer parlors and at informal gatherings. This complex and multifaceted discussion involves several themes that drive the debate on whether condom usage diminishes sexual pleasure. A central theme in this debate is the perceived reduction in sensation, with many people confirming reduced physical sensation while using condom during sex. For the fact

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that many people prioritize physical pleasure over safety, this perceived reduction in physical sensation leads to resistance against the use of condoms during sex. There are other factors at play beyond the perceived reduction of physical sensation. Factors such as anxiety about proper condom application can also lead to discomfort and avoidance. The fact that many people associate condoms with casual dalliances, as opposed to committed relationships, can as well be a factor. Gender dynamics also contribute to this discussion, where men and women often have different attitudes on condom usage. But generally, men typically express more resistance because of concerns about pleasure.

However, all these factors have been resolved by recent technological advancements with the production of more sensitive condoms that have made it possible for sensation to be enhanced while maintaining protection. This opens the door to changing the narrative around condom usage, especially as public health messaging moves towards the promotion of condoms as pleasure-enhancing instead of solely protective. Moreover, many studies are starting to question the notion that condom significantly reduces pleasure. Recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses have found that the relationship between condom use, and pleasure is more complex than traditionally assumed, with psychological and relational factors often playing a larger role than physical sensation alone (Blashill & Safren, 2015; Agnew, Harvey, VanderDrift, & Warren, 2017). These studies have exposed the fact that attitudes and expectations play significant roles in the way condoms are experienced. According to these studies, condoms can increase pleasure by reducing anxiety about sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy for some people. All these notwithstanding, many barriers yet hinder the acceptance of condoms in the eyes of many. Some of the reasons include the fact that there seems to be a stigma attached to open discussions about sexual pleasure and many people are also resistant to changing their established beliefs and behaviors. Due to all these, it becomes evident that there is a need for a more nuanced discussion around condom use. By exploring this theme and challenging the conventional wisdom that condom use reduces sexual pleasure and intimacy, this paper aims to present a framework for understanding how condoms can empower individuals to navigate the paradox of pleasure and protection. This will ultimately foster human flourishing.

The complex relationship between sexual pleasure, safety, and human well-being will be analyzed in this paper through the lenses of two key theories (existential and feminist) to integrate three concepts that are fundamental to this discourse (embodied subjectivity, relational ethics, and ontological security). From the existential angle, this paper will explore how condom use relates to personal authenticity and freedom. It will consider how individual values and life choices align with safer sex practices. With the recognition that true intimacy involves aligning one's sexual practices with both personal and relational values, this perspective will also examine the impact of condom use on intimacy and connection between partners.

From the feminist angle, condom use will be re-examined through the lens of the power dynamics and gendered expectations at play during sex. There is significant societal pressure and power imbalances that influence sexual negotiations. From the feminist angle, condom use is re-examined through the lens of the power dynamics and gendered expectations at play during sex. There is significant societal pressure and power imbalances that influence sexual negotiations. This is seen from the fact that traditionally, men are expected to be the initiators and aggressors in sex while women are expected to be passive and submissive. Put simply, many societies give more power and control in sexual encounters to men, making it harder for women to negotiate condom use.

At the heart of condom use resistance lies a perceived paradox, which could be called the *Pleasure-Protection Paradox*: the tension between sexual pleasure and protection. This paradox is rooted in the widespread belief that condoms diminish physical sensation and emotional intimacy, positioning safety and pleasure as competing rather than complementary goals. Qualitative research across diverse cultural contexts reveals consistent themes: individuals report that condoms create a physical barrier that reduces sensation, interrupts spontaneity, and symbolically distances partners from one another (Higgins & Wang, 2015; Kordoutis, Loumakou, & Sarafidou, 2000). These perceptions are reinforced by societal narratives that frame ‘raw’ or unprotected sex as more authentic and intimate.

However, emerging evidence challenges this binary opposition. Studies demonstrate that psychological factors such as anxiety about sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy can significantly diminish sexual pleasure regardless of condom use (Farmer & Meston, 2006). For individuals experiencing such concerns, condoms may paradoxically enhance pleasure by reducing anxiety and enabling greater presence and engagement during sexual encounters. This reframing suggests that the pleasure-protection relationship is more complex than commonly assumed, mediated by individual psychology, relational dynamics, and broader socio-cultural contexts.

Our framework addresses this paradox by proposing that condom use, when situated within an integrated understanding of embodied subjectivity, relational ethics, and ontological security, can serve as a catalyst for sexual flourishing.

This paper challenges the conventional notion that condom use leads to a reduction in sexual pleasure and intimacy. The paper seeks to promote a more nuanced understanding of condom use and its effects on sexual experiences by critiquing the roots of this assumption and presenting evidence to counter it. Furthermore, the paper introduces a new framework that points to the positive effects of condom use on overall human well-being and flourishing. The idea of human flourishing which is rooted in positive psychology involves health, meaningful relationships emotional well-being, and personal growth. When applied to condom use, this framework helps us explore how safe sexual practices might contribute to these dimensions of flourishing beyond mere disease prevention. This new perspective can revolutionize public health approaches and sex education curricula. Rather than seeing condom use as a necessary but unpleasant precaution, we may increase adoption and consistency of use among sexually active individuals when we reframe it as a positive contributor to overall health. This framework bridges the gap between public health imperative and individual experiences. This change in perspective could lead to more effective educational strategies and interventions, which ultimately will contribute to improved sexual health outcomes and enhanced quality of life for individuals and communities.

Condom use can be a powerful tool for promoting sexual health, autonomy, relational ethics, and ontological security, ultimately enhancing human flourishing. While the theoretical framework we propose is universal in its applicability to human sexual flourishing, we have chosen to illustrate its practical relevance through the Nigerian context. Nigeria presents a particularly salient case study for several reasons: First, the country experiences high rates of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, yet condom use remains inconsistent despite widespread availability (Mbachu *et alii*, 2019). Second, deeply rooted cultural misconceptions and stigma surrounding condom use persist, creating barriers that extend beyond mere access to include complex social, relational and psychological dimensions (Onayade, Abiona, Ugbala, Alozie, &

Adetuyi, 2008). Third, the interplay of traditional gender norms with modern sexual health discourse in Nigeria exemplifies the tensions our framework seeks to address. By grounding our theoretical discussion in this specific context, we demonstrate how the integrated concepts of embodied subjectivity, relational ethics, and ontological security can illuminate pathways toward sexual flourishing even in settings where cultural resistance to condom use is pronounced.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### *Existential Theory*

Existential theory posits that individuals are responsible for imbuing their lives with meaning through their choices and actions (Thiyagarajan & Swaminathan, 2019). This theory has its origins in philosophy with the likes of Søren Kierkegaard (Megna, 2015; Wu, 2024), Martin Heidegger (Wu, 2024), Jean-Paul Sartre (McLeod, 1968), and Viktor Frankl (Länge & Sykes, 2006; Wurm, 1997) playing significant roles in its development and understanding. It is based on the idea that free choice is an essential property of human beings and human beings can create meaning and purpose in their lives because of this free choice. In essence, existential theory suggests that an individual has a choice in who they desire to be. With this understanding of existentialism, it seems important to relate it to the concept of sexual decision-making. This will help drive home the choice of this theory as the foundation of the paper.

Sexual decision-making is a process. It is the process by which individuals make conscious decisions by considering and choosing whether to engage in sexual activities, the circumstances under which they feel comfortable doing so, and the individuals with whom to engage in the activities (Christopher & Cate, 1984; Hulton, 2001). It is a process that involves conscious and intentional choices (Hertlein & Villasante, 2015). Many factors influence this decision-making, including but not limited to personal values, cognitive and social elements, and situational contexts (Christopher & Cate, 1984; Hulton, 2001; Yoskowitz, Patel, Kaufman & Denton, 2017). Existentialism then, when explored in sexual decision-making will provide a deep perspective on human autonomy, responsibility, and freedom. It will shed more light on the implications of sexual choices especially concerning the use of condoms. It will reflect on questions such as how we understand autonomy, freedom, and responsibility in the context of sexual decision-making. It will explore whether these concepts have anything to do with condom use or whether they are mere concepts only encountered in the world of ideas. This is an example of the perspective that existential theory will provide. Recent applications of existential psychology to sexual health have emphasized how meaning-making and authenticity in sexual choices contribute to overall well-being and relationship satisfaction (Vasconcelos *et alii*, 2014). In sexual decision-making, autonomy is the ability to make independent, informed choices concerning one's sexual practices. This is made evident by the acknowledgment of the fact that individuals informed by sufficient knowledge and consistent values, should have control over their sexual practices (Osamor & Grady, 2016). An individual who understands that condom use is not coerced because of disease prevention but because he feels better when he makes the decision himself, will be in a better position to flourish in the whole process. Autonomy has to do with the fact that decision is made by the individual in question and not by any circumstance or agency outside the individual.

Another fascinating concept in existential theory is freedom which in the context of sexual decision-making is interpreted as the capacity to engage in sexual activities without undue fear of negative consequences. It is worth noting that this freedom is not absolute but is influenced by different factors such as personal ambivalence, socio-sexual attitudes, external pressures, and cognitive capacities (Richards & Brase, 2023). What this means is that individuals might be free to make their decisions, but that freedom is not complete or unlimited. It is limited because it is shaped by many factors that can influence, complicate, and restrict our choices.

Finally, we cannot sufficiently have a discourse on existential concepts and theory while ignoring the idea of responsibility. This is a fundamental aspect of the framework of human flourishing in condom use. Responsibility shifts the perception of condom use from a precaution that is burdensome to a positive act of self-care and care for others. This angle encourages individuals to take responsibility for their sexual health and well-being, as well as that of their partners. An individual's choice to engage in safe sex practices is a reflection of the individual's responsibility and freedom (Kordoutis *et alii*, 2000). It is a consideration of the health of others which aligns with the existential emphasis on authentic existence and the consequences of an individual's actions. In the context of condom use, it can be seen as an expression of empowerment and personal agency within sexual relationships. It highlights the individual's ability to make informed decisions concerning their well-being and sexual health. Individuals exercise autonomy in protecting themselves and their partners from potential risks or unintended pregnancies by choosing to use a condom.

### *Feminist Theory*

Feminism involves complex ideologies, legal frameworks, and movements that have evolved over many years to resolve gender inequality. Jose (2024) offers an overview of feminism's evolution from the early fight for women's voting rights to this day. It is the belief in social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Feminist perspectives on sexual autonomy, gender equity, and bodily integrity highlight the significance of consent, individual agency, and balanced dynamics in sexual encounters. Central themes in this view are bodily autonomy, informed consent, and reproductive rights.

Bodily autonomy has to do with choices around sexual activities, contraceptive use, and reproductive health. It ensures that each individual has control over what happens to her body without external pressure. Another fundamental pillar is informed consent, which advocates for all parties in a sexual encounter to understand and freely agree to engage in the activities fully. This consent from the party must be explicit and continuous, ensuring that everyone involved in the activity is on the same page and that no one is being manipulated. Reproductive rights emphasize the significance of access to contraception and comprehensive reproductive healthcare. This ensures that individuals can choose their reproductive futures without fear of restriction or judgment.

With regards to feminist theory then, condom use should be seen as a tool that empowers marginalised groups. It gives women the power to decide what happens to their bodies without any external pressure such as the man they want to engage in sexual activities, coercing them. It also addresses the power imbalance that feminists are so focused on trying to resolve. Feminists believe that the power dynamics in general especially in sexual relationships is against the female gender. So, the new framework which is seeing condoms as tools that enhance human flourishing makes more sense.

### *Human Flourishing*

Aristotelian ethics posits that the good life is a virtuous activity following reason (Cleemput, 2006; Cordner, 1994, 2002; Segall, 2020). This is the root of human flourishing. Human flourishing refers to the holistic well-being and satisfaction individuals can have. It simply means the capacity to lead a fulfilled life. It is a concept that serves everyone's interest and involves our shared humanity. It inherently values health and is universally applicable to all human existence. Every individual should be able to thrive and actualize their potential for good health. For decades, public and mental health experts have aimed to improve vitality at the individual and community levels. The World Health Organization's 1948 definition of health as "complete physical, mental, and social well-being" has significantly impacted the study of human flourishing (Bertozzi, Tosti, & Fontana, 2016). The definition's focus on well-being started a search for a better understanding of well-being. It influenced a gathering of medical education experts to conclude in 1952 that the mid-century health objective goes beyond the cure of diseases to include maximum mental, physical, and social efficiency for individuals, families, and communities (Clark, 1953). While preventive measures are crucial, this statement points out that they fall short of a comprehensive, biopsychosocial approach that considers well-being and human life.

Logan, Berman, & Prescott (2023) conceptualized human flourishing as the realization of a condition where every aspect of an individual's existence is deemed positive. It is interpreted as existing in "a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good" (VanderWeele, 2017). Many arguments have been advanced that view sexuality as a crucial aspect of overall well-being or human flourishing. This perspective advocates for the inclusion of sexual health and reproductive autonomy as essential aspects of human flourishing, which includes a wide range of human experiences and outcomes, including aspects of sexual health and relationships. Within the context of sexual health and relationships, flourishing may be influenced by the quality of emotional and sexual intimacy, communication, and satisfaction within romantic partnerships. Human flourishing is achieved by engaging in significant, positive, and considerate sexual interactions. It concludes a range of well-being dimensions, which includes sexual health, psychological and physical health, and personal and relational growth. This can be influenced by factors such as mutual respect, consent, emotional intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and the absence of harmful behaviors, such as coercion or exploitation.

Generally speaking, condom use contributes to a sense of well-being by providing a means of protection against STIs. As demonstrated in our discussion of ontological security, this protection reduces anxiety related to sexual health risks, thereby enhancing both well-being and sexual flourishing. Condom use also supports autonomy. Through the use of condoms, an individual can exert control over their sexual health and make informed decisions that align with their values and desires (Ezekiel, Metta, & Mosha, 2022; Mitchell & Bell, 2020).

## **EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY AND SEXUAL AUTONOMY**

### *Embodied Subjectivity*

This refers to the idea that an individual's experiences are strongly based on the physical body; they arise from the physical body and the interactions of the physical

body with the environment. This concept acknowledges that the body is not just a vessel for the mind. Instead, it is integral to how individuals perceive and understand the world (Fugali, 2013; Seok, 2013). To properly understand the concept of embodied subjectivity, we have to go as far back as the era of the classical Greek philosopher Plato, who was convinced that the mind and the body are distinct from each other (Bova & Livingston, 2017). In a different era, Edmund Husserl (Brudzińska (2014) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Azisi, 2020) had a different idea focused on what they called phenomena of experience. They believed that every knowledge of our world and us is based on the fact that an individual is a unity of the mental (mind) and physical (body). The mind and the body are not distinct from each other, but they are seamlessly woven together.

This idea of embodied subjectivity is strongly interconnected with sexual activities through bodily experiences, desires, and emotions. Sensory perception is a fundamental aspect of this connection. Our physical experiences influence how we perceive and interact with our environment, affecting our subjective understanding of reality. Embodied subjectivity in this context refers to the fact that women perceive their bodies as an integral part of who they are. Anything done to one's body is directly done to the individual. If a partner refuses to use condom during sexual encounter, the partner is directly demeaning who the other partner is. The logic behind this is that the body is not just a tool from which an individual can disconnect at will. Whatever happens to the body is fully experienced by the individual as happening to him. This is grounded in the phenomenologist's idea that the sense of self is tied to the body, and the body is the medium through which the individual experiences life. The exploration of embodied subjectivity in the context of the proposed framework that condom use enhances human flourishing opens up new vistas that hitherto have not been sufficiently explored. The experience is taken for granted but the area has not yet been sufficiently explored by science. For instance, a rape victim will always feel that the act was a desecration of his/her body. The rape victim will find it difficult to disconnect from his/her body as if the body is a tool that can be dropped in the toolbox. It is the same when a partner refuses to use condom during sex. Condom use protects against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). As we will discuss in the section on ontological security, this protection contributes to a sense of safety that has important implications for sexual experience and embodied presence. Additionally, condom use points to an individual's agency and self-awareness which demonstrates a person's ability to prioritize their health and well-being, as well as that of their partner(s).

Empirical research supports the relationship between embodied awareness and sexual satisfaction. Studies using mindfulness-based interventions have shown that individuals who report greater interoceptive awareness and present-moment focus during sexual activity report higher levels of sexual satisfaction, arousal, and orgasmic function (Silverstein, Brown, Britton, & Roth, 2011; Blycker & Potenza, 2018; Berenguer, Rebôlo, & Costa, 2019; Brotto, Stephenson, & Zippa, 2022). Furthermore, research in the context of condom use suggests that individuals who maintain bodily awareness during protected sex report levels of pleasure comparable to unprotected sex, while those who focus on negative cognitions about condoms report significantly reduced pleasure (Calabrese, Bianchi, Zea, Reisen, & Poppen, 2012; Gebhardt, Dusseldorp, & Kuyper, 2006; Randolph, Pinkerton, Bogart, Cecil, & Abramson, 2007). These findings suggest that embodied subjectivity mediates the relationship between condom use and sexual experience.

### *Sexual Autonomy*

Individuals need control over their sexual health and overall well-being. This control is seen in the level of autonomy that individuals have when it comes to sexual decision-making. This is where the use of condoms can play a significant role by offering individuals greater control. This autonomy is manifested in various ways, including but not limited to empowering individuals to control reproduction, promoting gender equality, reinforcing consent culture, enabling spontaneity, etc. In the context of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, condoms can be seen as a tangible manifestation of the decision to engage in protected sex, transforming abstract concepts of safety and responsibility into concrete, embodied actions. In this phenomenological framework, condoms not only provide practical benefits but also contribute to a more intentional and embodied sexual experience. They become a means through which individuals can more fully realize their sexual autonomy, allowing for a deeper integration of personal values, health considerations, and sexual expression in their lived experiences. This is in line with the findings of Onayade *et alii* (2008) that many females were inconsistent with condom use simply because they were disadvantaged with regard to condom negotiation. This shows that to a reasonable extent; women lack sexual autonomy.

This embodied awareness, however, does not exist in isolation. Sexual experience is inherently relational, enacted between individuals who bring their own subjectivities, desires, and vulnerabilities into intimate encounter. The bodily self-awareness that embodied subjectivity provides becomes the foundation for ethical engagement with sexual partners.

### **RELATIONAL ETHICS AND MUTUAL RESPECT**

To understand what relational ethics is, we have to take a look at what traditional ethics is. As a branch of philosophy, ethics refers to the determination of what is morally good and bad, just and unjust, duties individuals owe to themselves and others, or the establishment of the nature of the obligations (Ornery, 1989). Put simply, it is involved with figuring out what is right and wrong and how people should act. It also considers what makes something a good or a bad choice (Schumann, 2001). This is traditional ethics. It reflects the critical evaluation of these determinations, identifying norms or standards of behavior that are implemented through moral reasoning (Ornery, 1989). Relational ethics on the other hand simply means the determination of what is morally good and bad within the context of the relational matrix within which individuals find themselves. This means that relational ethics emphasizes the importance of relationships in the determination of right and wrong. This approach to ethics recognizes that decisions about things that are morally good and bad involve many factors including the interconnectedness of caring relationships and contextual elements (Sandhu, Webber, Brown, & Cahill, 2024). Traditional ethics is objective while relational ethics tilts towards subjectivity meaning that while traditional ethics focuses on universal rules, relational ethics focuses on individual relationships and situations.

In sexual relationships, the use of condoms can serve as an obvious manifestation of consideration, respect between the partners, and mutual care, all of which reinforce the principles of relational ethics. It serves as a demonstration of the commitment that couples have for each other's well-being and a shared understanding of the importance of sexual health and safety within their relationship when couples prioritize the use of

condoms. Not only that, the actual discussion and agreement to use condoms during sexual activities requires partners to respect each other's autonomy and preferences. This mutual respect is a cornerstone of relational ethics and contributes to the overall health and fulfilment of the relationship.

Relational ethics is concerned with having ongoing, honest conversations about sexual health and the boundaries of each person. The ability to talk openly and have this type of conversation is crucial for making condom use a shared responsibility between the partners. Couples that talk about these things understand each other better and make decisions that keep both of them safe and comfortable.

Within our suggested framework, relational ethics involves the ethical considerations and interpersonal relationships that shape decisions regarding safe sexual practices. It emphasizes the significance of connections between individuals and their mutual obligations. This concept can be broadened to include enhancing human well-being through adopting safe sex practices (Atchison & Burnett, 2016; Feeney & Collins, 2015). Substantial research indicates that male-dominated sexual relationships can hinder condom usage, while robust relational support and open communication can encourage it (Mitchell & Bell, 2020; Oberle, Nagurney, & Jones, 2016; Phyllis, 2013).

Research on sexual communication and consent demonstrates that relational ethics enhance both relationship satisfaction and sexual health outcomes. Studies show that couples who engage in explicit sexual communication, including discussions about condom use, report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and more consistent condom use than couples who avoid such conversations (Godinho, Pereira, Pegado, Luz, & Alvarez, 2024; Leddy, Chakravarty, Dladla, De Bruyn, & Darbes, 2015; Widman, Choukas-Bradley, Noar, & Francis, 2014). Moreover, interventions targeting communication skills have proven effective in increasing condom use among diverse populations (Wang *et alii*, 2020), suggesting that relational ethics can be cultivated through education and practice. The quality of communication matters: partner-centered, consent-focused communication predicts better sexual and relational outcomes than do coercive or avoidant communication patterns (Kim, Muise, & Impett, 2018; Lutmer & Walker, 2024).

While relational ethics establishes the interpersonal framework for sexual flourishing, its practice depends upon a deeper sense of both physical and existential security. Partners who relate ethically create conditions for what we term ontological security: a fundamental sense of safety that enables individuals to be fully present, vulnerable, and authentic in sexual encounters.

## ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY AND WELL-BEING

### *Ontological Security*

The concept of ontological security refers to the sense of stability, continuity, and order an individual experiences which contribute to their overall well-being (Steele, 2024). Simply put, ontological security refers to a sense of stability and safety in one's existence. This is achieved when people follow regular social and cultural habits and keep a steady sense of who they are (Glucksam, 2018). This feeling is very closely related to an individual's trust that their material and social environment will stay predictable (Danermark & Möller, 2008). It is a personal experience that is influenced by wider narratives in society (Croft, 2012). It is the feeling one has of being safe and grounded in the world with the comforting knowledge that life is predictable and

manageable. This sense of stability arises out of consistent routines and a reliable social environment. It gives people the crucial feeling that they understand their place in the world. An individual becomes less anxious about challenges when their ontological security is strong enough.

This ontological security is very relevant to the discussion of condom use as it pertains to reducing fears of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The fear of STIs can negatively impact one's ontological security. Condom use, which is a recognized method for reducing the risk of STI transmission, can contribute to a sense of ontological security by alleviating fears associated with these infections (Holmes, Weaver, & Levine, 2004; Kassie, Berhe, Kassahun, & Yenus, 2019). Kigbu and Nyango (2010) and Eaton and Hoesley (2014) also affirm that condoms are effective in the reduction of HIV infection and gonorrhea risk in men and women, with male condoms being 80% to 90% effective when used correctly. So, when an individual is assured to an extent that they are protected against these risks, their overall sense of safety and well-being in their sexual relationships will be stronger.

Partners who agree to use condoms create a safety net for themselves, which allows them to engage in sexual activity with an added peace of mind arising from the fact that they are taking steps to protect themselves and their partners. When anxiety is reduced, the sense of ontological security is greatly enhanced as individuals feel more in control of their sexual health outcomes. This reduction in anxiety has a paradoxical effect: rather than diminishing pleasure (as the perception of physical barrier might suggest), the psychological relief from health concerns can actually enable individuals to be more present, relaxed, and engaged during sexual activity, thereby enhancing both emotional and physical pleasure (Onyemaechi, Obi-Nwosu, Nwafor, Umenweke & Agu, 2022).

The relationship between sexual anxiety and pleasure has been well-documented empirically. Studies consistently show that anxiety significantly diminishes sexual arousal, satisfaction, and function (Hale & Strassberg, 1990; Nobre & Pinto-Gouveia, 2006). Conversely, interventions that reduce sexual anxiety, including cognitive-behavioral approaches and psychoeducation about safer sex practices, improve sexual outcomes (Kane *et alii*, 2019). In the specific context of condom use, research indicates that individuals who experience high anxiety about STIs/pregnancy but do not use condoms report the lowest sexual satisfaction, while those who use condoms and consequently experience low anxiety report satisfaction levels equivalent to or exceeding those in monogamous partnerships not using condoms (Grubb *et alii*, 2020; McLaurin-Jones, Lashley, & Marshall, 2017). These findings support our framework's claim that ontological security can enhance rather than diminish sexual flourishing.

### *Confidence and Pleasure*

There is a complex and interconnected form of relationship between safety, security, and sexual pleasure. Safety relates to physical protection; Security goes beyond just physical safety to include emotional and psychological stability, while sexual pleasure refers to the physical and emotional enjoyment of sex. This shows that safety and security are often considered prerequisites for sexual pleasure since they offer critical conditions for individuals to engage in sexual activities without fear or distress. A case in point is the qualitative study of adults with mild cognitive impairment, which emphasized the importance of addressing sexual pleasure as an essential component of

sexual health services. This suggests that a safe environment is necessary for individuals to explore their social-sexual lives (Onyemaechi, 2025; Turner & Crane, 2016). Again, a systematic review on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) concluded that PrEP increases emotional intimacy, and reduces sexual anxiety, both of which lead to an increased sexual pleasure arising from the sense of safety and security (Curley, Rosen, Mistler, & Eaton, 2022). Yet a different study on women with provoked vestibulodynia (PVD) demonstrated that women's sexual and relationship intimacy was associated with greater sexual satisfaction and function. This indicates that emotional security in a relationship can enhance sexual pleasure (Bois, McDuff, Grégoire, Rosen, & Bergeron, 2013). Also, Štulhofer, Ferreira, & Landripet (2013) carried out a study with the conclusion that emotional closeness and comfort do not necessarily reduce sexual desire, as seen in the study of Croatian men, where no negative association was found between relationship intimacy and male sexual desire.

When individuals understand that condom use is a demonstration of care for their partners, then positive sexual experiences follow. The same is true when they can communicate effectively about sexual needs and wants (Power, Kauer, Bourne, & Fisher, 2024, Achebe & Onyemaechi, 2023). This understanding and communication lead to more consistent condom use which invariably enhances a sense of confidence and relaxation during sexual interactions. Power *et alii* (2024) also noted that young men who report positive feelings about sex are more likely to use condoms regularly. This suggests that condom use does not detract from the enjoyment of the act but may enhance it by aligning with positive sexual attitudes.

Embodied subjectivity, relational ethics, and ontological security all form an integrated, dynamic system. In the following section, we examine how these pillars interact and reinforce one another to create pathways towards sexual flourishing.

### THE INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK: HOW THE THREE PILLARS INTERACT

While we have presented embodied subjectivity, relational ethics, and ontological security as distinct concepts, their true power emerges through their interaction. These three pillars do not function independently but form a dynamic, self-reinforcing system that amplifies each component's contribution to human flourishing.

#### *Embodied Subjectivity Enables Relational Ethics*

Embodied subjectivity provides the essential foundation for ethical relating. Without awareness of one's own embodied experience, meaningful communication about sexual desires, limits, and needs becomes impossible. An individual who lacks connection to their own bodily experiences cannot articulate authentic preferences, recognize their own discomfort, or advocate for their boundaries. Conversely, embodied awareness enables individuals to enter sexual encounters with clarity about their desires and limits, creating the possibility for genuine consent negotiation and mutual respect. This embodied self-knowledge is not selfish but relational: it is precisely by knowing oneself that one becomes capable of being known by another and of recognizing the other's distinct subjectivity.

### *Relational Ethics Generates Ontological Security*

When partners engage in sexual encounters grounded in mutual respect, open communication, and shared decision-making they create conditions for ontological security. Ontological security, as discussed earlier, refers to a fundamental sense of safety, consistency, and trust that enables individuals to be vulnerable without fear. Ethical relating generates this security through several mechanisms: First, when partners demonstrate consistent respect for boundaries and active engagement in consent negotiation, they establish trust that reduces anxiety about exploitation or harm. Second, mutual communication about condom uses and sexual health creates transparency that eliminates uncertainty and worry about hidden risks. Third, shared decision-making distributes responsibility, preventing the isolation and burden that arise when one partner bears sole responsibility for protection. Through these mechanisms, relational ethics transforms sexual encounters from potentially anxiety-producing situations into spaces of safety and trust.

### *Ontological Security Enhances Embodied Subjectivity*

The cycle continues: ontological security, in turn, deepens embodied subjectivity. When individuals feel fundamentally safe, they become capable of greater presence and bodily awareness during sexual encounters. Anxiety and fear pull attention away from embodied sensation; when these dissipate through ontological security, individuals can be fully present to their physical experiences. The paradoxical effect is that condom use, by contributing to ontological security (reducing worry about STIs and pregnancy), actually enables greater attention to pleasure and sensation rather than less. This presence, this full embodied engagement, further enriches the individual's capacity for authentic communication and ethical relating, thus continuing the cycle.

### *The Virtuous Cycle and Sexual Flourishing*

What emerges from these interactions is a virtuous cycle: embodied awareness → ethical relating → ontological security → deeper embodied awareness, and so on. Each iteration of this cycle amplifies the others. The framework is dynamic rather than static, generative rather than additive. This integrated system creates optimal conditions for human flourishing in sexual contexts: individuals are simultaneously self-aware, mutually respectful, and fundamentally secure, enabling them to experience sexual encounters as sites of pleasure, intimacy, meaning, and growth.

Condom use, situated within this framework, becomes not an impediment but a facilitator. Rather than disrupting intimacy, condoms contribute to the ontological security that enables deeper intimacy. Rather than reducing pleasure, the anxiety reduction condoms provide allows for greater bodily presence and sensory engagement. The apparent paradox dissolves: protection and pleasure are not competing goals but mutually reinforcing dimensions of sexual flourishing.

## **APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK: THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

Having established our integrated theoretical framework, we now turn to its application in a specific cultural context. Nigeria provides an illuminating case study for examining how embodied subjectivity, relational ethics, and ontological security operate

within a setting characterized by significant barriers to condom use. The Nigerian context demonstrates both the challenges to sexual flourishing that arise when these three pillars are undermined by cultural misconceptions, and the potential for transformation when they are strengthened through education, policy, and individual empowerment.

Research has shown that condoms are effective in protecting individuals against sexually transmitted infections, including but not limited to HIV (Holmes *et alii*, 2004). Nevertheless, Evidence shows that many individuals are inconsistent in its use (Gueye, Speizer, Corroon, & Okigbo, 2015; Bogart *et alii*, 2011) because they hold wrong beliefs concerning some health risks and side effects associated with condom use. Some studies have explored the negative stereotypes people have about those who use condoms (Adongo *et alii*, 2004; Gueye *et alii*, 2015; Onyemaechi, Obi-Nwosu, Nwafor, Umenweke, & Agu, 2022). In Nigeria, these misconceptions are complex and have been documented across various studies. They significantly impact sexual health outcomes, including the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Mbachu *et alii*, 2019). They influence attitudes and behaviors concerning sexual health (Ahmed, Abdel-Fattah, & Younis, 2020). While contributing to misunderstandings that prevent effective public health interventions (Macharia, Mwaniki, Kombe, & Habtu, 2017), they also perpetuate unsafe sexual practices. Two prominent misconceptions include the belief that only unfaithful partners use condoms and that condoms are not necessary for stable relationships. These misconceptions demonstrate the importance of a cultural shift, education, and awareness to promote human well-being.

It is not uncommon in Nigeria to hear someone who is against the use of condoms in a relationship take a stand with the effect that partners in a relationship do not need to use condoms unless one of them has been unfaithful. To individuals who think like this, whenever you bring up the conversation of condom use, they go all out adversarial, trying to accuse the person who suggested condom use of being unfaithful. "Otherwise, why would he/she suggest condom use if he/she has been faithful." This misunderstanding that condoms are exclusively suggested by those who have been unfaithful to their partners is widespread, and it persists. In effect, this misconception assumes that the partner who suggested condom use has taken part in casual sexual encounters. It creates a stigma that associates condom use with a lack of trust and causes many committed couples to forgo condom usage entirely. Interestingly, this misconception assumes fidelity on the female's part and infidelity on the man's part. That is why, for men, using condoms within a relationship is often seen as an indication of cheating, while for women who suggest condom use may be seen as distrustful of their partners. This association between condom usage and infidelity is both inaccurate and harmful because it has the potential to introduce mistrust in a relationship simply because one partner is comfortable enough to suggest condom usage. It is vital to change the conversation surrounding condom use to address this misconception. We should encourage condom usage as a responsible choice for everyone instead of associating it with infidelity. Couples should be comfortable enough to engage in open discussions about their sexual health and see condom use as a way to safeguard each other's well-being and allow the other person to flourish. By presenting condom usage as an act of care and responsibility, we can help reduce the associated stigma and make it a more accepted practice.

Furthermore, many in Nigeria believe that condoms are unnecessary in stable, long-term relationships. This is often based on the erroneous assumption that once a relationship is established, especially within a marriage or long-term partnership, the risk of contracting STIs is minimal. But this view is short-sighted and neglects the

fact that being in a committed relationship doesn't guarantee protection against STIs. Certain infections, if undetected, could still present risks, especially if the partners did not undergo STI testing before entering the relationship. It is essential to see condom usage in committed relationships as an expression of mutual care and consideration. This approach can challenge these misconceptions. It emphasizes the fact that using condoms is not a sign of distrust but rather demonstrates a joint dedication to safeguard both partners' well-being and allow both partners to flourish. By encouraging open conversations between couples about their sexual health, the use of condoms in long-term partnerships can become more commonplace. This can take care of the erroneous belief that condoms become unnecessary after a relationship reaches a particular stage.

### *Needed Cultural Shift*

Celebrating condom usage as an empowered and responsible decision can significantly improve individual and relational flourishing. This is a much-needed cultural shift in Nigeria. This shift involves reframing condom use from being seen as just a preventive measure to being recognized as a positive, conscious choice that reflects respect, self-care, and mutual well-being. With this necessary shift, individuals can experience greater peace of mind. It will help reduce anxiety related to sexual health risks while fostering deeper intimacy and trust in their relationships.

Condom use gives individuals the power to take control of their sexual health. This reinforces the individual's autonomy over their body. It enables individuals to engage in sexual activity with confidence, knowing that they care for each other. This sense of empowerment contributes to personal flourishing by promoting physical well-being, emotional security, and sexual satisfaction. People who are in control of their sexual health are more likely to experience a fulfilling and joyous relationship with their bodies. This is crucial for overall well-being.

Through a cultural embrace of condom use, relational flourishing is also improved. Couples will engage in open, honest conversations about their sexual health, desires, and boundaries when they start viewing condoms as a shared responsibility. This cultivates a sense of mutual respect and cooperation, deepening trust and emotional intimacy. It becomes an expression of care and protection rather than an obstacle to pleasure or an indication of distrust. Stronger and more respectful relationships are built when couples prioritize each other's safety and comfort through condom use.

This cultural shift can be achieved through comprehensive sex education and public health messaging. Condoms should be promoted as tools that demonstrate mutual respect and care and enhance sexual pleasure and relational health. This promotion will help challenge misconceptions about condom use. Public campaigns can emphasize the importance of condom use as a positive choice that aligns with values of self-care, responsibility, and respect for one's partner. Ultimately, normalizing and celebrating condom use can lead to a healthier, more respectful society where sexual well-being is prioritized. This cultural shift would reduce stigma and create a more inclusive and empowering environment where individuals and relationships thrive.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SEXUAL HEALTH AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

### *Implications for Research*

Research emerging from this framework should pursue four several specific directions:

*Measurement Development:* Researchers should develop and validate measures of embodied subjectivity in sexual contexts, relational ethics in intimate partnerships, and ontological security specific to sexual health decision-making. These measures could include self-report scales, behavioral observations, and physiological indicators (e.g., cortisol levels as markers of anxiety reduction).

*Empirical Testing:* Studies should test the proposed relationships among the three pillars using structural equation modeling or longitudinal designs. For instance: Does embodied subjectivity predict relational ethics? Does relational ethics mediate the relationship between condom use and sexual satisfaction? Do individuals high in ontological security report greater consistent condom use?

*Intervention Studies:* Randomized controlled trials could evaluate interventions designed to strengthen each pillar. For example, mindfulness-based sex education programs could target embodied subjectivity; consent negotiation skills training could enhance relational ethics; and couples counseling interventions could build ontological security.

*Cross-Cultural Research:* The framework should be tested across diverse cultural contexts to identify both universal principles and culturally specific manifestations. Comparative studies could examine how embodiment, ethics, and security are understood and enacted differently across cultures while exploring whether the integrated relationship among pillars holds cross-culturally.

### *Implications for Policy*

Public health policy informed by this framework would shift from narrowly behavioral approaches to holistic strategies that address embodiment, relationships, and security:

*Messaging Strategies:* Public Health campaigns should reframe condom use from a purely protective measure to an enabler of sexual flourishing. Messages could emphasize: ‘Condoms allow you to be fully present,’ ‘Mutual respect includes mutual protection,’ or ‘Security enables intimacy.’ This positive framing may prove more persuasive than fear-based messaging.

*Comprehensive Sex Education:* Educational policies should mandate curricula that integrate pleasure, embodiment, communication skills, and consent alongside biological information and STI prevention. The Ontario (Canada) health curriculum’s inclusion of consent and healthy relationships alongside technical information provides one model.

*Healthcare Training:* Healthcare providers should receive training in discussing sexual flourishing, not merely disease prevention. Providers could learn to engage patients in conversations about embodied sexual experiences, relationship dynamics, and security concerns as part of sexual health consultations.

*Structural Interventions:* Policies should address structural barriers to condom access while recognizing that access alone is insufficient. This includes subsidized or free condom distribution, but also investments in relationship education programs, mental health services (to address anxiety), and gender equity initiatives (to address power imbalances that undermine relational ethics).

### *Implications for Education*

Sex education informed by this framework would differ substantially from conventional approaches in the following aspects:

*Pedagogical Methods:* Rather than lecture-based information transmission, education should employ experiential learning, role-playing for consent negotiation, reflective exercises for embodied awareness, and small-group discussions for exploring values and ethics.

*Content Integration:* Curricula should integrate rather than separate topics. A unit on condoms, for example, would include: (a) technical skills (application); (b) communication practice (how to negotiate use); (c) embodied reflection (how condoms feel, how to remain present); and (d) values clarification (alignment between condom use and personal/relational values).

*Inclusive Approaches:* Education should adopt pleasure-inclusive frameworks that validate sexual pleasure as a legitimate dimension of human flourishing while simultaneously teaching that pleasure and protection are complementary. The WHO's framework for comprehensive sexuality education provides useful guidance.

*Developmental Appropriateness:* Curricula should introduce concepts at developmentally appropriate stages. For younger adolescents: basic body awareness and boundary-setting (embodied subjectivity and relational ethics foundations). For older adolescents: more sophisticated discussions of consent negotiation, sexual decision-making, and security.

*Specific Example:* A lesson for older adolescents might involve: (1) mindfulness exercise to increase bodily awareness; (2) scenario-based discussion of consent negotiation involving condom use; (3) reflection on how anxiety about STIs/pregnancy affects their experiences; (4) small-group creation of 'ethical agreements' for hypothetical relationships; (5) skills practice in using condoms with discussion of maintaining presence and pleasure."

## CONCLUSION

This article has advanced an integrated theoretical framework for understanding condom use as a catalyst for human flourishing rather than an impediment to sexual pleasure and intimacy. By synthesizing insights from existential theory and feminist theory, we have shown how three interconnected concepts form a dynamic system that enables individuals to navigate the apparent paradox of pleasure and protection.

Our synthesis reveals that existential and feminist perspectives, while emerging from different philosophical traditions, converge in their emphasis on autonomy, authenticity, and relational respect as foundations for human flourishing. Existential theory contributes the recognition that sexual practices must align with individual values and authentic self-understanding to be meaningful. Feminist theory adds the crucial insight that sexual autonomy cannot be understood apart from power dynamics, gender norms, and relational justice. Together, these theoretical lenses illuminate how condom use, far from being merely a technical intervention, engages fundamental questions of embodiment, ethics, and security that shape the quality of sexual experience.

The novelty of our approach lies in demonstrating how these three pillars function not as separate beneficial conditions but as an integrated, self-reinforcing system. Embodied awareness enables ethical relating; ethical relating generates ontological security; ontological security deepens embodied awareness. This virtuous cycle creates

optimal conditions for sexual flourishing that transcend the binary opposition between pleasure and protection.

This framework makes several distinct contributions to existing knowledge. First, it reframes the condom use debate from a narrow focus on physical sensation to a holistic understanding of sexual flourishing that includes psychological, relational, and existential dimensions. Second, it provides a theoretical vocabulary for understanding why condom use resistance persists despite widespread knowledge of health risks -namely, because conventional health messaging fails to address the embodied, relational, and security-related concerns that shape sexual decision-making. Third, by demonstrating the integration of our three pillars, we offer a more sophisticated alternative to individualistic models of sexual health that neglect relational and contextual factors. Fourth, our application to the Nigerian context illustrates how universal theoretical principles can illuminate culturally specific challenges, providing a model for context-sensitive applications of the framework.

Our framework opens several avenues for future research and practice. Empirically, the framework invites studies that operationalize and measure embodied subjectivity, relational ethics, and ontological security in sexual contexts. Mixed-methods research could explore how these concepts manifest across diverse populations and cultural settings, and how their interaction produces measurable outcomes in sexual satisfaction, relationship quality, and consistent condom use. Quantitative measures could assess the strength of associations between each pillar and sexual flourishing outcomes, while qualitative approaches could illuminate the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes that underlie these relationships.

Interventionally, the framework suggests novel approaches to sex education and sexual health promotion. Rather than relying solely on information provision or fear-based messaging, interventions could cultivate embodied awareness through mindfulness-based approaches, strengthen relational ethics through communication skills training and consent education, and build ontological security through couples-based interventions and community-level stigma reduction. Programs could be designed to address all three pillars simultaneously, recognizing their integrated nature.

Policy-wise, the framework supports shifts in public health messaging from negative (disease prevention) to positive (flourishing promotion) framings of sexual health. It suggests that condom promotion campaigns could be more effective by emphasizing how condoms enable autonomy, respect, and security rather than solely focusing on risk reduction. By situating condom use within a broader vision of sexual flourishing, public health efforts may better resonate with individuals lived experiences and values, ultimately increasing both uptake and consistent use.

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