



Sexual Scripts & Affirmative Consent

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Abstract

This pilot study includes a sample from the emerging adult demographic and tests a series of hypotheses that investigate the relationship between social/sexual script use and adherence to affirmative consent standards. Specifically, this study aimed to distinguish between the general tendency to use scripts and the use of a particular script (Traditional Social Exchange Ideology). Exploratory analyses were also run regarding attitudes toward hooking up. There were two statistically significant findings from this research: A negative direct relationship between Traditional Social Exchange Ideology and Affirmative Consent Adherence and a positive, direct relationship between Cognitive Flexibility and Affirmative Consent Adherence.

Introduction

- Affirmative consent requires an enthusiastic “yes” rather than just the absence of a “no,” and has five main tenets (voluntary, informed, reversible, specific, and unburdensome) (Im et al., 2021).
- Social/sexual scripts are the automatic, sequence of events individuals expect in social (including sexual) situations that save time and energy at the cost of increased risk of bias (Itri & Patel, 2017).
- The use of social scripts has been identified as a barrier to adhering to affirmative consent standards (Miller, 2021; Youstin, 2022).
- However, research has not distinguished between the general tendency to use scripts and the use of specific scripts.
- Since previous research has not examined the general tendency to use scripts, there is not an existing way to measure this construct.
- Cognitive flexibility can be thought of as the opposite of the general tendency to use scripts, as cognitive flexibility refers to how easily and readily one adapts their thoughts and behavior in response to external stimuli (Abelson, 1976; Itri & Patel, 2017).
- Traditional social exchange ideology centers around the idea that historically (and still today) women exchange sex for resources necessary for survival, such as financial resources (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004).
- Traditional social exchange ideology can be conceptualized as a social script where sex is expected in return for things such as buying a date dinner.
- Any script that includes the expectation of sex could act as a barrier to affirmative consent adherence.
- Hookup culture is prevalent in college populations (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020). Given the gendered expectations in traditional social exchange, this ideology may be related to gender-based variations in views on hooking-up.

Example of a Social Script :

- The cashier will say “for here or to go?”
- They will place their order.
- The cashier will tell them how much to pay.
- They will swipe their credit card.
- The cashier will say “have a nice day.”
- They will respond “you too.”

Methods

Participants completed a one-time survey that included a demographic questionnaire as well as the questionnaires listed below.

Participants:

- N=63 undergraduate students
- Gender: Women (n=54), Men (n=7), Other (n=2)
- Age: 18-22 years (M=19.16 years)
- Race/Ethnicity: White/European American (n=46), Hispanic/Latino(a) (n=10), Black/African American (n=2), Asian/Asian American (n=1), Other (n=4)
- Sexuality: Straight (n=51), Bisexual (n=6), Lesbian (n=2), Questioning or Unsure (n=1), Other (n=3)

Measures:

- General Tendency to Use Social Scripts:** Cognitive Flexibility Scale (CFS) (Martin & Rubin, 1995)
- Traditional Social Exchange Ideology:** Economics of Sex Endorsement Scale (ESES) (Fetterolf & Rudman, 2017)
- Affirmative Consent Adherence:** Vignettes: 6 vignettes depicting various sexual interactions were designed for this study based on vignettes used in Gibson (2016) and LaBore (2018) and participants were asked to rate how much the people in the vignettes enjoyed the encounter, felt safe, and wanted to have sex
 - Vignette 1: Verbal consent and non-verbal refusal
 - Vignette 2: Non-verbal consent and verbal refusal
 - Vignette 3: Verbal and Non-verbal, enthusiastic consent
 - Vignette 4: Non-verbal, enthusiastic consent
 - Vignette 5: Unenthusiastic, no response, passive communication of lack of consent
 - Vignette 6: Coercion induced agreement to unwanted sex

- Attitudes Toward Hooking-Up Questions (Reiber & Garcia, 2010)
- Hook-Up Double Standard for Respect Questions (Allison & Risman, 2013)

Analyses:

- Mediation Analyses using PROCESS were used to analyze the hypothesized mediation model (See Figure 1)
- Correlations were used for exploratory analyses regarding hook-up attitudes

Results

Vignette Data:

- For Vignette 1 (verbal consent and non-verbal refusal) there was a significant, direct relationship between Traditional Social Exchange Ideology and Affirmative Consent Adherence in a negative pattern ($b = -.26, p = .02$).
- For Vignette 4 (nonverbal enthusiastic consent) there was a significant, direct relationship between Cognitive Flexibility and Affirmative Consent Adherence in a positive pattern ($b = .38, p = .02$).
- There were no other significant relationships found among the vignette data.

Hookup Correlation Data:

- The data revealed a non-significant decrease in a negative correlation between respect for men and their amount of hooking up activities and Traditional Social Exchange Ideology: non-significant, $r = .236, p = .062$
- There was a significant report of data for the negative correlation between respect for women and their hookup activity level in that there is a reported decrease in respect for women the more they hook up and Traditional Social Exchange Ideology: significant, $r = .309, p = .014$

Discussion & Conclusions

- The more a person relies on social scripts in their sexual life, the less likely they will be to pick-up differences in responses of consent because they already have an idea of “what should come next.”
 - A mind that is more open to new experiences and changes in direction of situation, a person is more likely to notice a difference in response to sexual advances whether verbally or non-verbally consensual or not.
- Even if men have a usually active hookup life, the amount of respect they receive does not decrease.
 - There is a double standard for women in that they are expected to hook up with less people in order to be seen as just as desirable as men who engage in the same, if not more, hookup activity.
- Sexual communication is complex, with both the general tendency to use scripts and the use of the specific script (Traditional Social Exchange) being barriers to affirmative consent depending on the scenario.
 - People particularly struggle with affirmative consent when it comes to non-verbal communication.
 - Future research should focus on multi-faceted interventions to address barriers to affirmative consent.

Acknowledgements

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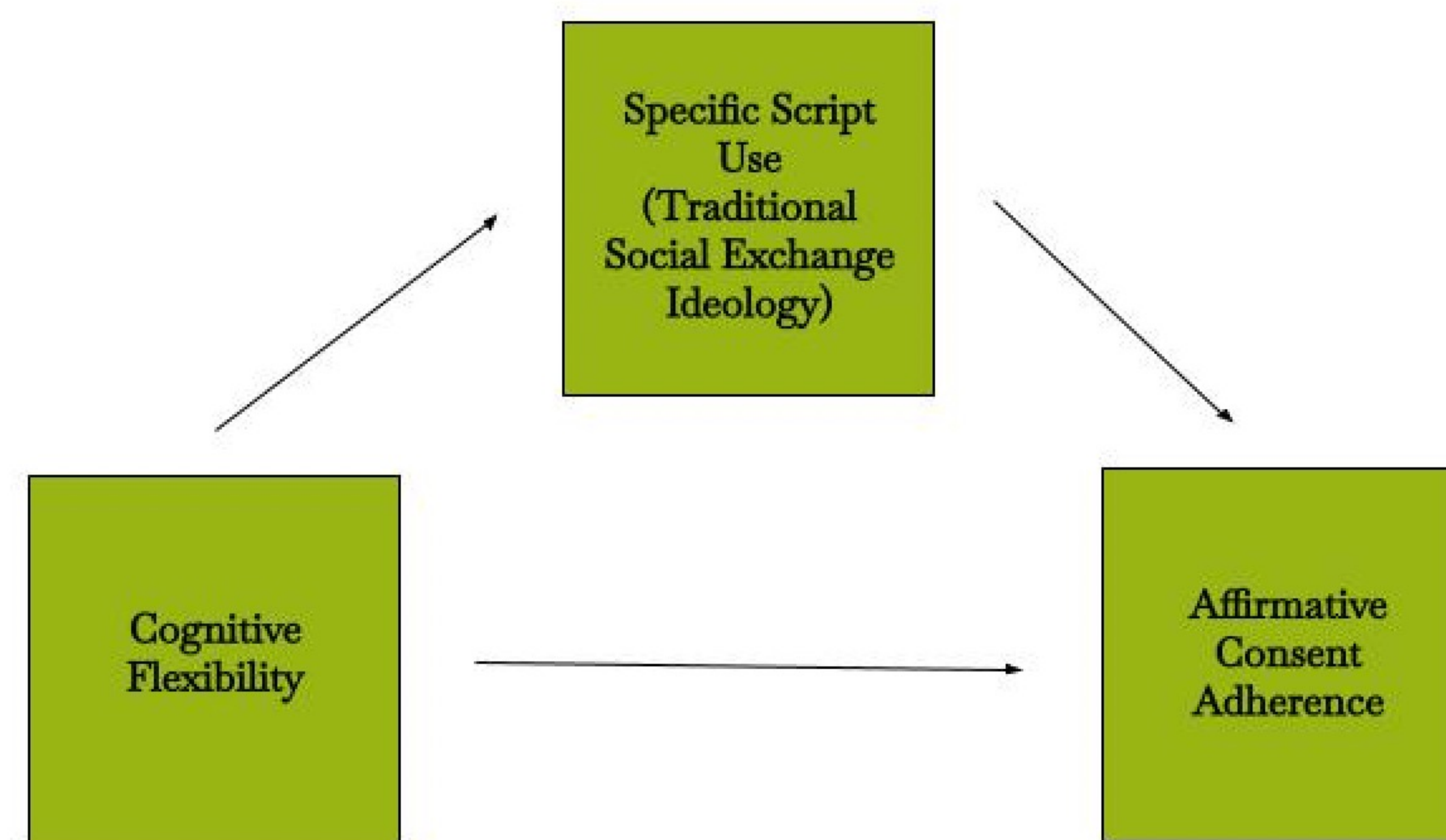


Figure 1: Hypothesis Mediation Model