FACULTEIT LETTEREN EN WIJSBEGEERTE

FLEXIBILITY AND FUN: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL SCRIPT (FLEXIBILITY) AND SEXUAL PLEASURE

A quantitative research about the relationship between sexual script (flexibility) and sexual pleasure in couples.

Words: 10.798

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Masterproef voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van Master in Gender en Diversiteit

Academiejaar 2024-2025, ingediend op 23/05/2025

UHASSELT KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION | KU LEUVEN | UNIVERSITEIT GENT | Universiteit Antwerpen | VUB VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Els Elaut for her guidance and feedback throughout this project. I also wish to thank my parents for continuously supporting my personal and academic growth, my partner for his encouragement and Leen De Schuymer for her invaluable assistance.

Summary

Introduction

This study analyses the relationship between adherence to traditional sexual scripts and the flexibility of these scripts in relation to the sexual pleasure experienced by individuals in heterosexual partnerships. Given the existing limitations in data concerning various dimensions of sexuality, this study adds to the growing body of literature that underscores the importance of an egalitarian view on gender and a more flexible adaptation of sexual scripts, ultimately enriching the experience of sexual pleasure.

Method

A sample of 518 participants was analyzed (M_{age} = 26.03, SD_{age} = 10.36), predominantly consisting of young adults. Participants completed validated questionnaires measuring the sexual double standard (SDSS), sexual script flexibility (SexFlex Scale) and sexual pleasure (ASPI), which includes 6 subscales (ASPI): Arousal Enjoyment, Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy, Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth, Interaction Enjoyment, Bonding Enjoyment and Sexual Experience Enjoyment. The correlations between the SDSS and the ASPI subscales, as well as between the SexFlex and the ASPI subscales, were examined. Additionally, mean differences across various groups including gender, sexual scripts, and educational level, were assessed. Following this analysis, the associations between SDSS, Sexflex and ASPI-subscales were further examined using multiple regression analysis and including gender and education level as control variables.

Results

Findings indicate that traditional sexual scripts correlate with lower levels of sexual pleasure and that sexual script flexibility is linked to increased sexual pleasure. These correlations were significant for Arousal Enjoyment, Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy, Interaction Enjoyment, Bonding Enjoyment and Sexual Experience Enjoyment. Only the subscale Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth showed no significant correlations. Multiple regression analysis and interaction effects revealed that gender and educational level did not significantly moderate the key associations, suggesting these predictors operate similarly across these groups.

Discussion

This research highlights the importance of adopting an egalitarian perspective on gender roles in sexual interactions, as traditional sexual scripts were consistently linked to lower sexual pleasure, while flexible scripts were associated with higher pleasure. These findings highlight how rigid

gendered expectations can hinder sexual well-being, whereas a more inclusive and adaptive approach supports it. Future research should explore how these dynamics play out in queer communities and across intersecting identities such as ethnicity and socioeconomic background, using adapted measures or qualitative methods to capture diverse experiences.

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Introduction

For a very long time, discussions surrounding sexual health and sexual rights largely excluded the concept of pleasure. This exclusion can be attributed, in part, to western religious traditions that characterize sex and sexual pleasure as a "dangerous, destructive and negative force" (Rubin, 2007). Engaging in sexual activity without the intent of reproduction was viewed as detrimental and a threat to societal order; it was believed that, if left unregulated, such behaviour would inevitably result in disorder and chaos (Rubin, 2007). In contemporary society, perceptions of sexual behaviour have undergone significant transformation; sexual pleasure is now regarded as increasingly important, moving beyond the traditional perspective of sexual intercourse solely for reproductive purposes. This shift is also reflected in academic research, where the notion of sexual pleasure has gained prominence, as evidenced by the abundance of related literature. While considerable studies have been conducted on sexual scripts and sexual flexibility, the relationship between these concepts and sexual pleasure remains underexplored. This research seeks to explore various elements that enhance sexual health, while also questioning conventional norms, potentially providing valuable insights for future public health interventions and policy development.

Before we dive deeper into the specific aspects of sexual scripts and sexual pleasure, we must clarify several concepts that are relevant to this subject.

Terminology

Sex and gender are two concepts that are undeniably connected to each other, nevertheless very different. Sex refers to the biological dimensions; an individual is categorized as male or female based on genetic, hormonal and anatomical factors (Marchbank & Letherby, 2014). Nevertheless, sex is not a strictly binary; approximately one out of 2000 individuals are born with a mix of male and female sex characteristics, which is identified as the intersex condition (Reis, 2013). Gender pertains to the social, cultural and psychological norms linked to these biological classifications (Gilbert & Scher, 1999). According to the World Health Organization, gender is defined as "the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men" (WHO, n.d.).

The concept of **gender role** encompasses societal expectations regarding the behaviours and actions deemed appropriate for women and men. These roles are informed by the dominant gender norms within a given culture. The mechanism through which children and adolescents learn these gender-specific behaviours – often influenced by educators, peers and media – is

known as gender role socialization. **Gender identity** is defined as an individual's internal perception of themselves as female, male, both or neither (Mintz & O'Neil, 1990). While gender identity pertains to one's internal experience, gender role relates to the outward manifestation of that identity in interactions with others. Gender roles often reflect society's expectations for how women and men are expected to interact during sexual encounters in romantic relationships (Ward et al., 2022), a phenomenon denominated as sexual scripts.

Sexual scripts are understood as cognitive representations of typical sequences of events that occur during sexual encounters (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). These scripts contain both descriptive components, detailing the features and actions commonly associated with a sexual situation, and normative components, outlining the behaviours that are deemed acceptable or expected within this context. They encompass a person's generalized knowledge regarding the standard elements of sexual interactions, including anticipations about partner behaviours and normative beliefs concerning the appropriateness of certain actions. A widely known sexual script is for example that it is the man that shows initiative, while the woman is the gatekeeper that sets boundaries.

The traditional sexual script (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992) in western, heterosexual romantic relationships prescribes specific gendered behaviours that men and women should follow during sexual interactions. These behaviours align with conventional gender roles (Masters et al., 2012). For example men are believed to have greater sexual desires than women, resulting in the expectation that they will initiate and pursue sexual activities more often than their female partner (Bonell et al., 2022; Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Masters et al., 2012). Such conventional gender roles put women in the role of 'gatekeeping' heterosexual sex; women are expected to initially resist and later comply with men's sexual advances (Bonell et al., 2022). Additionally, women are frequently expected to act as more passive and submissive during sexual intercourse (Bonell et al., 2022; Wiederman, 2005). Despite these traditional sexual scripts, couples will in reality not always follow the societal and cultural norms on how to behave sexually and will often creatively shape their own sexual encounters (Klein et al., 2018). When faced with sexual challenges, the sexual scripts of couples may experience significant disruption, postulating flexibility in adapting these scripts (Bouchard et al., 2023).

Sexual script flexibility refers to the concept of being able to adjust and adapt the script in a flexible manner in the face of occurring challenges (Bouchard et al., 2023). A rigid sexual script (eg, only penis-in-vagina penetration as the single determinant of sex), provides fewer ways to cope with a sexual problem (for example erectile disfunctions). This restricted range of options

may contribute to a decline in sexual well-being, potentially exacerbating sexual distress among couples (Bouchard et al., 2023). Nobre et al. (2003) adopt a cognitive perspective, examining the relationship between beliefs and sexual disorders. They found that sexual dysfunctional beliefs are related to sexual dysfunction. Beliefs and perceptions regarding sexuality and sexual expression influence sexual behaviour and the interpretation of sexual experiences, specifically when difficulties occur. For instance, if a man holds the (traditional) belief that he must sustain an erection throughout the entirety of a sexual encounter, he may perceive any reduction in erectile firmness as a failure, potentially leading to increased erectile challenges. Similarly, if a woman believes that vaginal intercourse is the sole acceptable form of sexual activity, she may encounter difficulties in achieving orgasm. These examples illustrate how particular sexual beliefs and expectations can impact sexual expression and sexual pleasure.

The **sexual double standard** can be generally described as the disparity in sexual activity, where men enjoy more favourable evaluations than women for exhibiting identical sexual behaviours (Milhausen & Herold, 2002). The social learning theory posits that a differentiation exists between gendered behaviours that are considered positive and those that are evaluated negatively (Pierce & Bandura, 1977; Mischel, 2015). Conventional gendered behaviours characterize sexual agency as a characteristic associated with males, while sexual passivity is associated with females (Eagly & Wood, 2003). Recent studies around this concept show mixed results; some studies find evidence for a traditional double standard (Lai & Hynie, 2010), others reveal a “reversed double standard”, indicating that male adolescents faced more negative evaluations for their sexual conduct compared to female counterparts (Milhausen & Herold, 2010; Papp et al., 2015). Other studies have identified the presence of double standards that vary between male and female adolescents. These studies revealed that sexual behaviours exhibited by peers of the opposite sex were assessed more unfavourably compared to those displayed by same-sex peers (Allison & Risman, 2013; Kreager et al., 2016; Soller & Haynie, 2016). For example, Allison & Risman (2013) discovered that within a sample of US college students, a greater number of male adolescents supported a traditional double standard, whereas a greater number of female adolescents adhered to a reversed double standard.

The sexual script

Sexual scripts in heterosexual relationships

Individuals utilize a variety of sources, including mainstream representations, both formal and informal education, personal experiences and their own desires to navigate sexual interactions (Harvey et al., 2023). Gagnon and Simon (1987) posited in their Sexual Script Theory

that scripts function at three distinct levels, influencing the way we interact with others. Sexual scripts operate on **(1) cultural, (2) interpersonal and (3) intrapersonal levels.** First, **culture-level scripts** encompass norms concerning sexual behaviour within societal, cultural, or subcultural contexts, thereby shaping the specifics of sexual interactions including the participants, settings, timing, motivations and methods involved (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 1987). Second, **interpersonal scripts (2)** are conceptualized as the structured representations of oneself and others that enable the performance of sexual activities. In contrast, **intrapsychic scripts** pertain to the organization of mental images and desires that provoke and maintain sexual arousal (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). We acquire broad expectations from sexual cultural scripts as represented in (social) media and popular discourse, while interpersonal scripts are formed by our personal experiences. Additionally, intrapsychic scripts allow us to mentally practice interactions and clarify our desires (Gagnon & Simon, 1987).

Cultural expectations in our western society prescribe certain sexual scripts for men and women specifically, interacting in sexual interactions in romantic relationships. These scripts include being passive and the prioritization of appearance for young women. They also imply adopting a relationship-oriented perspective on sexuality for women, shaping the environment in which sexual activity takes place (typically a stable, monogamous relationship), while also framing the objective of such activity as fostering intimacy and strengthening relational bonds (Levant et al., 2011). These cultural scripts for young men imply being assertive and emotionally detached, emphasizing the recreational aspects of sex (Ward et al., 2022; Alksnis et al., 1996). There are forces present on all three levels (cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts) that contribute to these scripts; research shows that greater mainstream media exposure (content generated for widespread consumption by large corporate entities; conventional screen media, television shows, films, music videos…) is linked to the acceptance of these expectations among young people in the US (Ward et al., 2022). Consequently, a stronger endorsement of these scripts is associated with several psychological outcomes such as distress, diminished sexual autonomy and more dysfunctional ideas about romantic relationships (Ward et al., 2022).

In the context of coupled sexual interactions, sexual scripts serve as guidelines that delineate the acceptable or anticipated sexual behaviours pertinent to specific contexts (McCormick, 2010; Cupach & Metts,1991; Dewitte et al., 2020; Metts & Cupach, 1989). These scripts outline the nature and sequence of sexual activities, as well as the roles of the individuals involved. It is essential for the members of a couple to engage in negotiations regarding their sexual interactions, thereby establishing a dyadic sexual script.

Traditional vs egalitarian sexual scripts

Research has indicated that men are much more likely to experience orgasm during sexual interactions (Allen & Carmody, 2012; Frederick et al., 2017; Narvaja, 2016). This phenomenon known as the "orgasm gap" is frequently attributed to the prevailing notion that heterosexual sexual interactions conclude once the male partner reaches orgasm (Allen & Carmody, 2012; Narvaja, 2016). Numerous other studies have supported these findings regarding the orgasm gap between men and women in heterosexual relationships (Herbenick et al., 2010; Laumann et al., 2000; Lloyd, 2005; Wade et al., 2005). This trend was observed across all sexual orientations; yet the most pronounced orgasm gap was noted between heterosexual women - approximately 65% of whom reported reaching orgasm during sexual intercourse with a man - and heterosexual men, of whom around 95% reported achieving orgasm during sexual intercourse with a woman. An American study conducted by Laumann et al. (2000) also found that 75% of men and 29% of women always have orgasms during sexual intercourse with their spouse. These results imply that societal sexual scripts create a certain expectation for women to engage in sexual intercourse without necessarily achieving orgasm, thereby aiding women in coming to terms with the relative rarity of their orgasms (Harvey et al., 2023). Gender is performed within sexual interactions, significantly influencing both the anticipated pleasure and the results in numerous monosexual, cisgender relationships (Harvey et al., 2023).

Interestingly, another study found that women who have sex with women are more likely to reach orgasm during partnered sex than women who have sex with men (Willis et al., 2018). Willis et al. (2018) suggest that this disparity can be partially explained by phallocentric imperatives referring to the gendered sexual narratives that prioritize male sexual experiences ('the traditional sexual script'). Specifically, these imperatives highlight the significance of vaginal-penile intercourse ('the coital imperative') and the emphasis on male physical pleasure ('the male orgasm imperative').

Previous studies indicate conflicting findings regarding the transition from traditional towards more egalitarian sexual scripts; this non-linear evolution often characterizes both social and ecological dynamics (Mathias et al., 2020). Although some research shows that people implement a more egalitarian framework (MacCorquodale, & DeLamater, 1979) and that sexual encounters are increasingly viewed as permissive (Finlay et al., 1985), it remains unclear whether these shifts have influenced the underlying sexual scripts. The research conducted by O'Sullivan & Byers' (1992) indicates that men and women follow a similar sexual script concerning their responses to and thoughts about initiations; however, this alignment does not apply for the actual

initiation of sexual activities, where men continue to initiate more often than women (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992). This study supports the notion that men and women still seem to follow the traditional sexual script regarding initiation; men tend to initiate more often than women. But there also seems a deviation from the traditional sexual script as women no longer function solely as restrictors; they respond to initiations with similar frequency as their male partners.

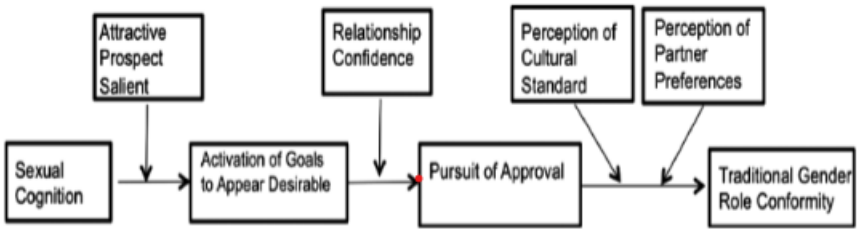
There is research that supports the suggestion that sexual scripts might be evolving for heterosexual men and women (Ortiz-Torres et al., 2003; Segal, 1994). Moreso, contemporary researchers contend that the concept of femininity has evolved beyond traditional ideas of sexual passivity and mere receptiveness to male advances. It now encompasses a range of behaviours including assertiveness in initiating sexual encounters, actively seeking pleasure, persuading hesitant male partners, engaging in coercive tactics and effectively negotiating safer sex practices (Anderson & Aymami, 1993; Anderson & Sorensen, 1999; Exner et al., 2003; Kamen, 2000; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992, 1993, 1996). Others findings support that men have internalized changes in modern masculinity, resulting in an expansion of male sexual narratives. This evolution transcends the traditional view of sex as merely a conquest or a means to an end, incorporating elements such as emotional depth, commitment and love (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Seal et al., 2000). Other research outside of sexuality studies also supports the notion of a larger structural shift allowing for various manifestations of masculinity such as the archetype of the 'New Man', referring to the possibility for novel arrangements among emotions, behaviours and institutional contexts (LaRossa & Coltrane, 1997; Connell, 2005; Messner, 1993, 1997; Segal, 2007).

Although these findings show a tendency towards a more egalitarian sexual script, numerous studies in public health indicate that a significant number of both women and men in heterosexual relationships still engage in culturally prevalent narratives that align with traditional gender norms (Ortiz-Torres et al., 2003; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Wagner et al., 2001; Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). But it is also important to look at the scripts on the interpersonal- and intrapersonal level because scripts encompass not only a comprehensive internalisation of gender norms within cultural contexts but they can also embody a form of resistance to these norms, as well as the proactive creation of novel cultural scenarios.

A Canadian study was conducted by Murray (2017) on thirty men between the ages 30 and 65 in long-term heterosexual relationships (+ 2,5 years), interrogating the extent to which men's descriptions of their sexual desire aligned with or diverged from traditional masculinity norms and sexual scripts. The participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire and were then interviewed (semi-structural) regarding their experiences related to sexual desire. The association

between men's sexual desire, traditional masculinity norms and sexual scripts found that, although the male participants reported high and constant levels of sexual desire and never declined an opportunity for sexual engagement, many men also acknowledged that they occasionally pretended to have sexual desire to conform to masculine norms or to avoid distress to their female partners. This highlights the possibility that men often feel compelled to express certain sexual desires in traditionally masculine manners and that such expressions may not necessarily reflect their genuine feelings or experiences. Dworkin & O'Sullivan's (2005) study shows that while the majority of men engaged in male-dominated sexual initiation practices, a significant number expressed a preference for more egalitarian approaches. They wanted to be seen as objects of attraction by their female partners and have shared narratives about wanting to collaborate in the 'labour' of sexual initiation.

A meta-analysis conducted by Sanchez et al. (2012) examined the existing research concerning the adherence to traditional gender roles and its relationship with sexuality among heterosexual men and women. They constructed The Sexual Cognition Model of Gender-Role Conformity to identify the contextual factors and moderators that could play a role between automatic sexual cognition and traditional gender-role conformity.



In this model, Sanchez et al. (2012) explain how thoughts about sex (sexual cognition) may trigger traditional gender-role behaviours (e.g. male dominance/female submission) through psychosocial processes. Sexual thoughts activate a desire to be attractive, especially when a romantic prospect (current or potential partner) is salient. The more attractive the partner, the stronger the motivation to conform to perceived desires (Morier & Seroy, 1994; Zanna & Pack, 1975). To gain approval, individuals adjust behaviour (e.g. self-presentation, appearance) to align with the other person's expectations (Sanchez et al., 2008). Secure individuals can deviate from scripts (e.g. women initiate more in long-term relationships; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010) and insecure individuals conform more to avoid rejection (e.g., submissive behaviour in anxious attachments; Impett & Peplau, 2002). Lastly, the conformity depends on beliefs about cultural norms (e.g., "men should dominate") and assumptions about partner preferences (e.g., "my

partner likes traditional roles"). Without explicit partner feedback, people will tend to default to cultural stereotypes (Hundhammer & Mussweiler, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2006). This model implies that there is a certain aspect of automaticity; sexual cognition primes gendered behaviour unconsciously. It underscores how societal norms and relationship dynamics reinforce traditional roles, often at the cost of authentic sexual expression.

Sexual script flexibility

When sexual difficulties emerge, the sexual scripts of partners may be disrupted. Given that penetrative intercourse is a prevalent component of many couples' sexual narratives, it can become challenging and undesirable to sustain this norm in the context of chronic health issues or sexual dysfunctions such as erectile problems or genito-pelvic pain (Beck et al., 2013; Dey & Shepard, 2002). When couples possess more inflexible sexual scripts and face a sexual issue (such as e.g. other sexual preferences than your partner, sexual communication, sexual desire, sexual pain, performance anxiety, orgasming too slow or quick…), they may find themselves with fewer options to cope with the challenge (Gauvin & Pukall, 2017). This restricted range of responses could lead to a decline in sexual well-being, potentially heightening sexual distress among partners. Conversely, couples who exhibit greater adaptability in their sexual scripts may be more capable of preserving their sexual well-being when confronted with typical sexual obstacles. Bouchard et al.'s longitudinal study (2023) shows that when individuals report higher levels of sexual script flexibility in response to sexual challenges, they also exhibited enhanced sexual satisfaction for both themselves as their partners. Increased flexibility was also correlated with heightened dyadic sexual desire and reduced sexual distress. Interestingly, this greater flexibility was also found to be associated with a decrease in their partner's dyadic sexual desire at the initial assessment, as well as a decline in the individual's own dyadic sexual desire four months later.

Sexual script flexibility has been researched quite often (Gauvin & Pukall, 2017; McInnis & Pukall, 2022; Yessick et al., 2022), primarily focusing on its role of coping with disruptions or challenges within sexual interactions. Future studies could explore the possibility that sexual flexibility serves as a broader indicator of overall sexual health, rather than merely reflecting resilience in responses to stressors.

Sexual pleasure

The World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) defined **sexual pleasure** as "the physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from shared or solitary erotic experiences, including thoughts, fantasies, dreams, emotions, and feelings" (World Association of Sexual Health, 2019). Interestingly, Werner et al. (2023) identified two different domains across existing definitions of **sexual pleasure** in research. Sexual pleasure can be defined as (1) unifaceted or multifaceted and it can be seen as (2) a state or a trait (Werner et al., 2021).

First, as a unifaceted experience, sexual pleasure can be defined as a singular, sensory experience, typically associated with pleasurable sensations during sexual activity or the attainment of orgasm. As a multifaceted experience, it can also include cognitive and emotional dimensions alongside physical sensations. Various activities and sources, both internal and external can result in these experiences (eg. fantasies, tactile sensations, safety, connection...).

A second approach can be found in the definition of sexual pleasure as a state of satisfaction or wellbeing that emerges from sexual engagement. Others say that it should also encompass a more enduring psychological disposition or capacity, such as the ability to experience enjoyment from sex or a sense of entitlement and self-efficacy regarding sexual enjoyment. It can be defined both as a situational experience (state) and as a more stable tendency towards such experiences (trait). The taxonomy proposed by Werner et al. (2023) combines these two concepts and defines sexual pleasure as (1) the positive emotions associated with rewards (state components), (2) the capacities to achieve and experience these rewards and (3) the tendency to engage in rewarding sexual activities (trait components).

Although evolutionary theories suggest that sexual behaviour primary serves reproductive purposes (Darwin, 1872); recent studies indicate that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is one of the primary reasons why people engage in sexual activities (Abramson & Pinkerton, 2002; Hull, 2008; Meston & Buss, 2007; van Lunsen et al., 2013). It refers to the positive feeling experienced when anticipated rewards are achieved and appreciated during sexual encounters (Werner et al., 2023). The variety of rewards associated with sexual activities contributes to the conceptualization of sexual pleasure as a multidimensional phenomenon (Goldey et al., 2016). Goldey et al.'s study (2016) proposes the conceptualisation of sexual pleasure through three primary domains: hedonic, intrapersonal and interpersonal. Each of these domains encompasses specific facets: the hedonic domain includes sensual pleasure, the intrapersonal domain involves pleasure-related mastery and validation, and the interpersonal domain focuses on interaction and bonding

pleasure. Each facet is associated with potential rewards that may be obtained through sexual engagement (Werner et al., 2023).

Heterosexual women generally report a higher incidence of sexual complaints compared to heterosexual men (Hendrickx et al., 2016). This disparity can be attributed to the societal tendency to prioritize male pleasure over female pleasure (Hall, 2019; van Lunsen et al., 2013). In many conservative and traditional cultures, women's sexual pleasure is still considered dangerous, undesirable or even irrelevant (Hall, 2019). Additionally, evolutionary theories suggest that while male climax is essential for reproduction, female climax is not strictly necessary, which contributes to the perception that women's sexual satisfaction is less critical than that of men. Consequently, when issues arise concerning male sexual pleasure, they are often deemed more 'important' and 'worthy' of treatment and attention than the sexual difficulties and lack of pleasure experienced by women (Hall, 2019).

Research (Laan et al., 2021; Regan, 2024) indicates that women tend to have a significantly less favourable experience of sexual activity compared to men. The phenomenon known as the **sexual pleasure gap** serves as a prominent illustration and validation of this assertion. Crutcher (2012) defines this as "a gendered inequality in opportunities to experience pleasure". She further posits that this gap is not solely based in a disparity in orgasm frequency but that women are conditioned to perceive their sexuality as a source of concern, and that they encounter restricted and often insufficient access to authentic erotic information and resources that emphasize true female pleasure.

Research has shown that sexual pleasure is a vital element contributing to sexual health and sexual rights (Ford et al., 2019; Gruskin et al., 2020; Kismödi et al., 2017; Landers & Kapadia, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021). Evidence shows that there is a positive correlation between sexual pleasure, sexual health and health-related outcomes (Gianotten et al., 2021). A comprehensive review has indicated that factors such as sexual satisfaction, pleasure and positive self-esteem significantly contribute to both sexual health and overall mental and physical well-being (Anderson, 2013). This assertion is further corroborated by earlier research, which demonstrated a link between the enjoyment of sexual activity and increased longevity among women (Palmore, 1982). Additionally, recent studies on sexual pleasure reveal encouraging implications for both psychological and behavioural outcomes (Laan et al., 2021). According to these studies, sexual pleasure is not only associated with higher levels of autonomy, self-esteem and empathy (Galinsky & Sonenstein, 2010; Sanchez et al., 2006) but also with several health indicators, including effective communication regarding sexually transmitted infections (STI's), consistent

condom use, and the absence of sexual dysfunction (Klein et al., 2022). Notably, sexual pleasure has recently been recognized as one of the four foundational elements of a holistic public health strategy regarding sexuality (Mitchell et al., 2021). These results underscore the significance of sexual pleasure in promoting overall health and the importance of interventions focused on improved sexual pleasure. The World Association of Sexual Health (WAS, n.d.) acknowledges "sexual pleasure as a component of holistic health and well-being: the right to sexual pleasure should be universally recognized and promoted" in the Declaration on Sexual Health.

The sexual scripts and sexual pleasure

The findings of a study conducted by Harvey et al. (2023) reveal that there seems to be a significant reliance on genitalia as a guiding factor in sexual activities, alongside a dependence on established sexual scripts rather than communication. This guiding quality refers to the fact that genitals signal the kind of sex that will occur. This observation aligns with the arguments by West and Zimmerman (1987), namely that gendered assumptions are closely tied to genitalia, thereby generating heteronormative and phallic-centric scripts. Their findings suggest that these heteronormative scripts are prevalent in discussions surrounding the orgasm gap and sexual pleasure (Harvey et al., 2023). These scripts prioritize penetrative intercourse, diminish the significance of cis women's pleasure and conclude with ejaculation (Harvey et al., 2023).

The existing literature on the association between sexual scripts and sexual pleasure seems to be limited, possibly attributable to the absence of standardized measurement tools. There are very few, if any, studies that address this relationship. This deficiency in the literature highlights the necessity for additional investigation and prompts our research inquiry: in what ways are traditional sexual scripts in heterosexual couples associated with sexual script flexibility and the experience of sexual pleasure?

The present study

This study investigates the relationship between sexual scripts in heterosexual partnerships, the flexibility of these scripts, and the experienced level of sexual pleasure within those scripts. The primary research question focuses on the connection between traditional sexual scripts, their flexibility, and the associated sexual pleasure. The first hypothesis states that a stronger presence of traditional sexual scripts in heterosexual relationships is related to lower levels of sexual pleasure. The second hypothesis states that a higher degree of flexibility in sexual scripts in heterosexual relationships is associated with higher levels of sexual pleasure.

Materials and method

Research design and sampling strategy

This study was situated within a quantitative research framework. Participants were recruited via a digital campaign on social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), which invited individuals in stable romantic relationships to take part in a study exploring the sexual aspects of their relationships. Participation was voluntary and accessible through a provided online link for two weeks (15/04/'25 – 30/04/'25). Inclusion criteria specified that participants had to be at least 18 years old and involved in a heterosexual relationship for a minimum of two years.

Participants

Prior to data collection, a power analysis indicated that a sample size of 84 participants was required to achieve a statistical power of 0.80 with an alpha level of 0.05. A total of 954 individuals participated by responding to the online questionnaire link. Complete data was collected from 518 participants aged between 18 and 90 years old (M_{age}= 26.03, SD_{age}= 10.36, 84% women). An additional 436 people did not complete the entire questionnaire and were excluded. Table 1 represents the background characteristics of the final sample (N= 518). A significant portion of the participants fell within the age range of 18 to 25 years (390 individuals, or 75% of the sample). Despite the minimum age requirement being set at 18, a significant number of participants emerged from TikTok, raising concerns about the potential for younger individuals to misrepresent their age. The sample comprised 437 women and 81 men, accounting for respectively 84% and 16% of the total respondents. Regarding educational levels, 67% of the participants achieved higher education qualifications, while 32% attained secondary education. The relationship duration varied between 2 and 64 years (M_{rel}= 6.04, SD_{rel}= 8.38).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N=518)

			Frequency	Percentage
Gender				
	Women		437	84,36%
	Men		81	15,64%
Age				
	18-25		390	75,29%
	25-90		128	24,71%
Educational Level				
	University		234	45,17%
	Higher education		117	22,59%
	Secondary education		167	32,24%
	MIN	MAX	M	SD
Age	18	90	26,03	10,36
Relationship duration	2	64	6,04	8,38

Data collection

The questionnaires were administered in Dutch via an online survey using the Qualtrics Research Suite. Participants received an informational letter and informed consent form (ICF) before the survey began. After reviewing and approving these documents, participants gave their consent by signing the form, with the option to withdraw at any time. For inquiries, participants could contact the principal investigator, Irena Coetsier, via email. Participants were not compensated for their involvement. The survey began with demographic questions, followed by questionnaires on sexual scripts (flexibility) and sexual pleasure. Completing the questionnaires took about 10 minutes, and responses were anonymous. To assess internal consistency, the McDonald's Omega (Hayes & Coutts, 2020) was chosen for the SDSS due to its ability to account for multidimensionality, unequal item weights, and heterogeneity in scale items. Unlike Cronbach's alpha, Omega does not assume tau-equivalence and provides a more nuanced reflection of reliability, particularly for datasets with unequal item relationships. Omega is also suited for non-continuous data and reveals both general and subscale reliability. Cronbach's alfa was employed for the SexFlex and ASPI.

Sexual scripts

Despite significant research on sexual scripting, tools for measuring it remain limited. The present study employed the Sexual Double Standard Scale (SDSS), a questionnaire created by Endendijk et al. (2021), which is an adapted version of the Scale for the Assessment of Sexual Standards Among Youth (SASSY) (Emmerink et al. (2017). The adapted SASSY distinguishes between traditional, egalitarian, and reversed sexual double standards (SDS). Participants were asked about their expectations regarding the frequency of sexual behaviours among different genders, using a 3-point Likert scale. Items were recoded to reflect traditional SDS norms (+1), egalitarian norms (0), or reversed norms (-1). A categorical principal component analysis (CATPCA) was conducted, indicating that the items loaded onto 3 factors. Among these, only the items associated with the first factor exhibited satisfactory internal consistency ($\omega = 0.63$). The items associated with the second and third factor, displayed insufficient reliability and were therefore excluded from the data analysis. The recoded scores for the consistent items (factor 1) were averaged to form a composite that reflects personal SDS norms.

Sexual Script Flexibility

Sexual script flexibility was measured using the 6-item SexFlex Scale (Gauvin & Pukall, 2017), which assesses how adaptable a person is to sexual challenges such as variations in preferences, communication, or function. Participants responded to statements like “I can easily adjust my approach to sex if necessary due to my sexual issues” on a 1-4 scale. Total scores ranged from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating greater flexibility. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.81$). The questionnaire was presented to the participants in Dutch. In order to ascertain maximal consistency with the original English version by Gauvin & Pukall (2017), a translation and back translation procedure was carried out with the help of a student fluent in English.

Sexual Pleasure

The Amsterdam Sexual Pleasure Inventory (ASPI Vol. 1.0) (Borgmann et al., 2025) measures both trait and state sexual pleasure, with the trait scale chosen for this study to capture typical sexual experiences. The trait scale showed high reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$). The following subscales were used to assess different dimensions of sexual pleasure, with corresponding sample items:

- **Arousal Enjoyment**: Enjoyment of sensual stimulation (e.g., "I love feeling sexual arousal") with excellent reliability (α= 0.88).
- **Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy**: Confidence in engaging in pleasurable sexual activities (e.g., "I know how to pleasure my sex partner") with good internal consistency (α= 0.72).
- **Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth**: Viewing oneself as deserving of positive sexual experiences (e.g., "During partner sex, I neglect my own pleasure") with weak internal consistency (α= 0.54).
- **Interaction Enjoyment**: Enjoyment of pleasuring and being pleasured by a partner (e.g., "I enjoy stimulating my sex partner during sex") with excellent reliability (α= 0.83).
- **Bonding Enjoyment**: Enjoyment of bonding rewards in sexual interactions (e.g., "During sex, I enjoy being close to my partner") with very high internal consistency (α= 0.88).
- **Sexual Experience Enjoyment**: Enjoyment of various sexual activities (e.g., "I enjoy fantasizing about sex") with sufficient reliability (α= 0.61).

The items were randomized to prevent response biases, and participants rated their agreement on a 6-point Likert scale. Subscale averages were calculated by summing available scores and dividing by the total number of valid responses. Each subscale was treated separately, and higher scores indicated a greater prevalence of the specific domain. Due to the validity issues raised by the original authors (Borgmann et al., 2025) of the scale, the subscales pertaining to Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth and Interaction Enjoyment were employed with careful consideration. Negative formulations in items related to Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth were reversed for interpretation alignment with the intended construct.

Analysis

The data were analysed using Excel and R-Studio. First, the data were accessed, recoded, and reorganized as needed. The internal consistency of the various questionnaires and their subscales was calculated. These processed data were then analysed following the guidelines and recommendations from the authors of the questionnaires. The completed calculations were imported into R-Studio for correlational analysis. Spearman correlations were calculated for both hypotheses, as the variables studied are not normally distributed and of quasi-interval level. We hypothesized a negative correlation between the SDSS and the ASPI (with higher SDSS scores reflecting more traditional sexual scripts) and a positive correlation between the SexFlex and the ASPI (with higher SexFlex scores reflecting more flexible sexual scripts). A correlation was considered significant if the p-value was ≤ 0.05. ChatGPT (GPT-4) was used to support the

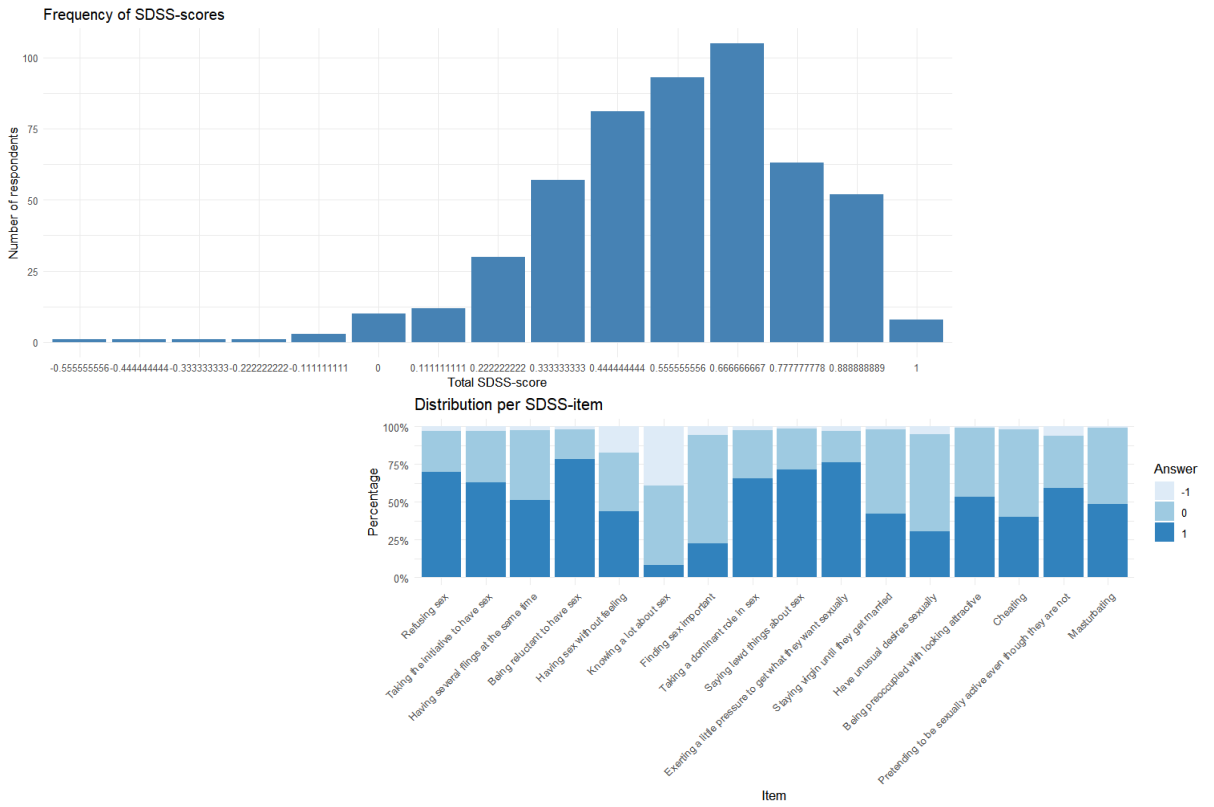
interpretation and formulation of statistical results. Final interpretations were made by the author. Throughout the analysis, participant anonymity was maintained.

Levels of measurement and distributions

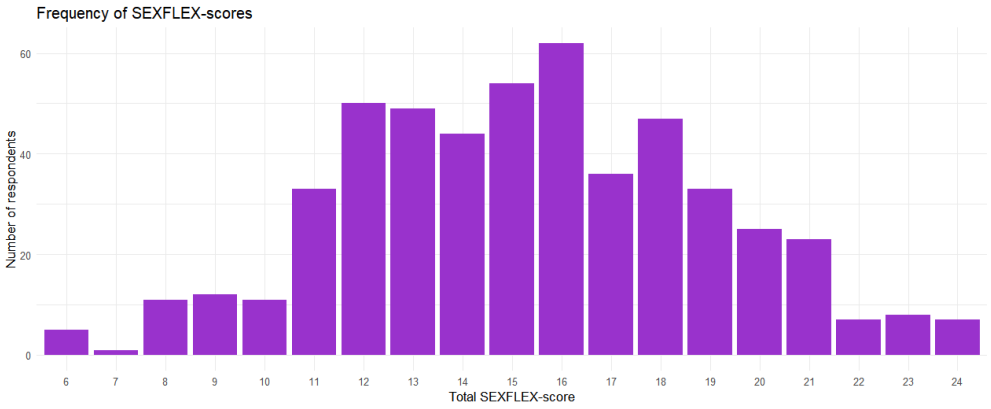
The original measurement levels—nominal (SDSS) and ordinal (SexFlex, ASPI)—were recoded into numerical values to enable operations such as averaging and summing. This recoding allowed for quasi-interval analysis, offering more flexible data manipulation while requiring careful interpretation. To explore data distribution, both bar charts (for ordinal data) and histograms (for interval-level interpretation) were used (Table 2), reducing the risk of overinterpretation. The histogram revealed that SDSS approached a negatively skewed distribution and the bar charts showed that responses were mostly characterized by a traditional view (mode 1). Distributions per SDSS-item reveal a remarkable higher amount of non-traditional responses (-1) on the item about knowledge about sex; a significant portion of participants indicated 'women' as their response to this question. SexFlex responses clustered around the centre (mode 2, “Sometimes”), suggesting an approximately normal distribution. ASPI data showed frequent strong agreement (mode 6), with the histograms again indicating negative skews.

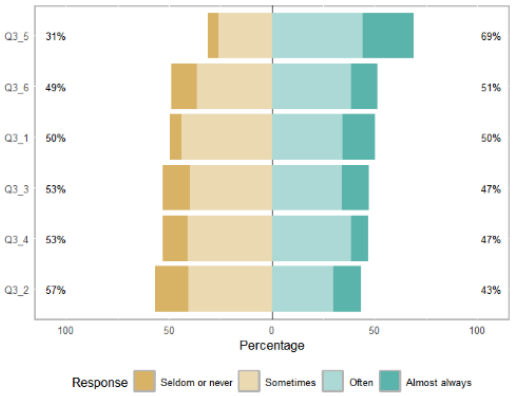
Table 2. distributions of the questionnaires

SDSS (histogram of total scores & bar chart of items)

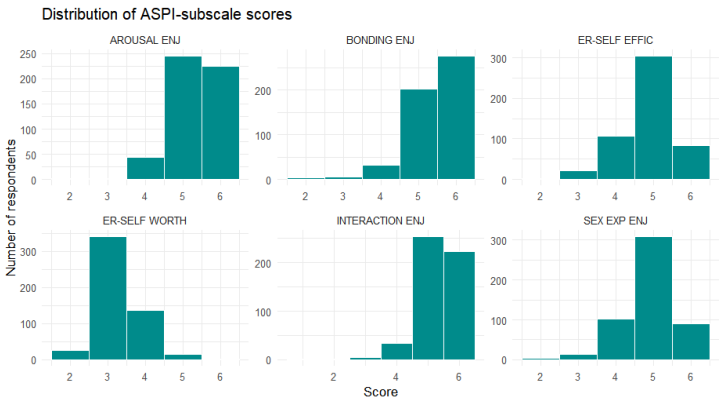


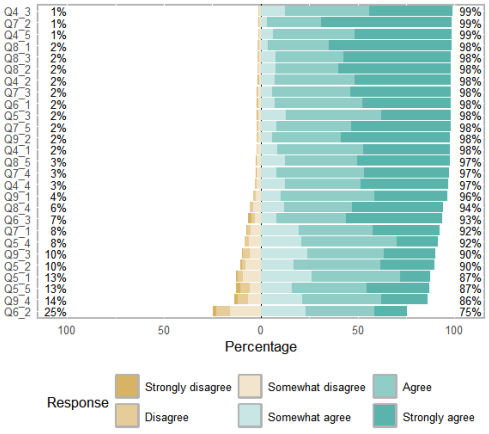
SexFlex (histogram of total scores & bar chart of items)





ASPI (histogram of total scores per subscale & bar chart of items)





Reflections on positionality

Research is inevitably shaped by the researcher's own background, experiences, and perspectives. Therefore, reflexivity is essential in acknowledging how these factors may influence the research process and outcomes. In this study, I reflect on my own positionality as a white, non-religious, heterosexual, and able-bodied woman. These aspects of my identity may subtly affect how I interpret participant responses and shape the formulation of research questions. For example, my white and non-religious background might influence how I perceive cultural or faith-based views on sexuality. Similarly, as a heterosexual and able-bodied person, I may unconsciously adopt normative assumptions about sexual relationships and experiences. While this research does not engage deeply with multiple intersecting identities, I find it necessary to be mindful of the limitations of my perspective. By actively engaging with diverse academic sources and critically questioning my own assumptions, I aim to minimize bias and enhance the transparency and credibility of the research. Acknowledging positionality is a step toward producing more inclusive and reflective scholarship.

Results

Group based differences

In general, certain aspects of the collected data are remarkable (Table 3). Based on the Wilcoxon rank-sum test (male – female and traditional – egalitarian) and the Kruskal-Wallis test (secondary – higher – university education), the following differences were found between groups (statistical significant correlations are indicated with an asterisk *). Gender comparisons showed no significant differences in traditionality of sexual scripts or flexibility, but women scored significantly higher than men on Bonding Enjoyment (ASPI). Participants with more egalitarian sexual scripts (SDSS) scored higher on Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy, Interaction Enjoyment, and Sexual Experience Enjoyment (ASPI) compared to the traditional scoring group. No difference was found in sexual script flexibility (SexFlex) between these groups. Regarding education, participants with a university degree scored significantly higher on Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy (ASPI) and lower on sexual scripts (SDSS) than those with secondary education.

Table 3. Group-based differences in sexual measures (Wilcoxon and Kruskal-Wallis Tests)

	Scale	Comparison	Group	Median	Range
	SDSS	Gender	Male	0.44	-0.56 – 0.94
			Female	0.44	-0.06 – 0.94
		Education*	Secondary	0.5000	-0.31 – 0.94
			Higher	0.5000	0.00 – 0.94
			University	0.4375	-0.56 – 0.88
	SEXFLEX	Gender	Male	16.0	6.0 – 24.0
			Female	15.0	6.0 – 24.0
		Education	Secondary	16.0	6 – 24
			Higher	15.0	6 – 24
			University	15.0	6 – 24
		Script type	Egalitarian	15.0	6 – 24
			Traditional	15.0	6 – 24
ASPI SUBSCALES	**AROUSAL ENJOYMENT**	Gender	Male	5.4	4.0 – 6.0
			Female	5.4	1.6 – 6.0
		Education	Secondary	5.4	1.6 – 6.0
			Higher	5.2	3.8 – 6.0
			University	5.4	1.6 – 6.0
		Script type	Egalitarian	5.4	1.6 – 6.0
			Traditional	5.4	2.0 – 6.0

ASPI SUBSCALES	**ENJOYMENT-RELATED SELF EFFIC**	Gender	Male	4.9	2.6 – 6.0
			Female	5.0	2.0 – 6.0
		Education*	Secondary	4.8	2.0 – 6.0
			Higher	5.0	2.4 – 6.0
			University	5.0	2.2 – 6.0
		Script type*	Egalitarian	5.0	2.0 – 6.0
			Traditional	4.8	2.2 – 6.0
	ENJOYMENT-RELATED SELF-WORTH	Gender	Male	3.17	2.33 – 6.0
			Female	3.00	1.67 – 5.33
		Education	Secondary	5.0	3.2 – 5.3
			Higher	5.0	3.0 – 5.0
			University	5.0	2.6 – 6.0
		Script type	Egalitarian	5.0	2.6 – 6.0
			Traditional	5.0	3.0 – 5.0
	INTERACTION ENJOYMENT	Gender	Male	5.4	3.0 – 6.0
			Female	5.4	1.0 – 6.0
		Education	Secondary	5.4	1.0 – 6.0
			Higher	5.4	3.2 – 6.0
			University	5.4	1.6 – 6.0
		Script type*	Egalitarian	5.4	1.0 – 6.0
			Traditional	5.2	1.6 – 6.0
	BONDING ENJOYMENT	Gender**	Male	5.2	3.2 – 6.0
			Female	5.6	2.2 – 6.0
		Education	Secondary	5.6	2.6 – 6.0
			Higher	5.6	3.2 – 6.0
			University	5.6	2.8 – 6.0
		Script type	Egalitarian	5.6	2.6 – 6.0
			Traditional	5.6	3.0 – 6.0
	SEXUAL EXPERIENCE ENJOYMENT	Gender	Male	5.13	3.0 – 6.0
			Female	5.00	2.25 – 6.0
		Education	Secondary	5.0	2.5 – 6.0
			Higher	5.0	3.0 – 6.0
			University	5.0	2.3 – 6.0
		Script type***	Egalitarian	5.25	2.5 – 6.0
			Traditional	5.00	2.3 – 6.0

*Note. Asterisk * refers to Significance (p) of the overall group difference (e.g., Wilcoxon/Kruskal-Wallis test); * = p < .05; ** = p < .01; *** = p < .001.*

Spearman correlational analysis

The correlations relevant to the hypotheses are indicated with underlining in Table 4, which illustrates the correlations between the sexual scripts and sexual pleasure, and sexual script flexibility and sexual pleasure. The remaining correlations, while not directly related to the hypothesis, are included for informational purposes. Statistical significant correlations are indicated with an asterisk *.

Is there a significant relationship between the degree of traditional sexual scripts and the experience of sexual pleasure in heterosexual couples?

In order to examine the relationship between the variables, a Spearman correlation analysis was conducted. The findings indicated that traditional scripts had significant negative associations with the subscales Arousal Enjoyment (ρ= -0.15 and $p < 0.05$), Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy (ρ= -0.18 and $p < 0.05$), Interaction Enjoyment (ρ= -0.19 and $p < 0.05$), Bonding Enjoyment (ρ= -0.12 and $p < 0.05$) and Sexual Experience Enjoyment (ρ= -0.22 and $p < 0.05$), indicating that adherence to a traditional sexual script correlates with decreased sexual pleasure (across these dimensions). With the exception of the subscale Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth (ρ= 0.01 and $p > 0.05$), the findings confirm our hypothesis. The heatmap in Table 5 provides a visual overview of the correlation strengths, facilitating the interpretation of the relationship between SDSS and the ASPI subscales.

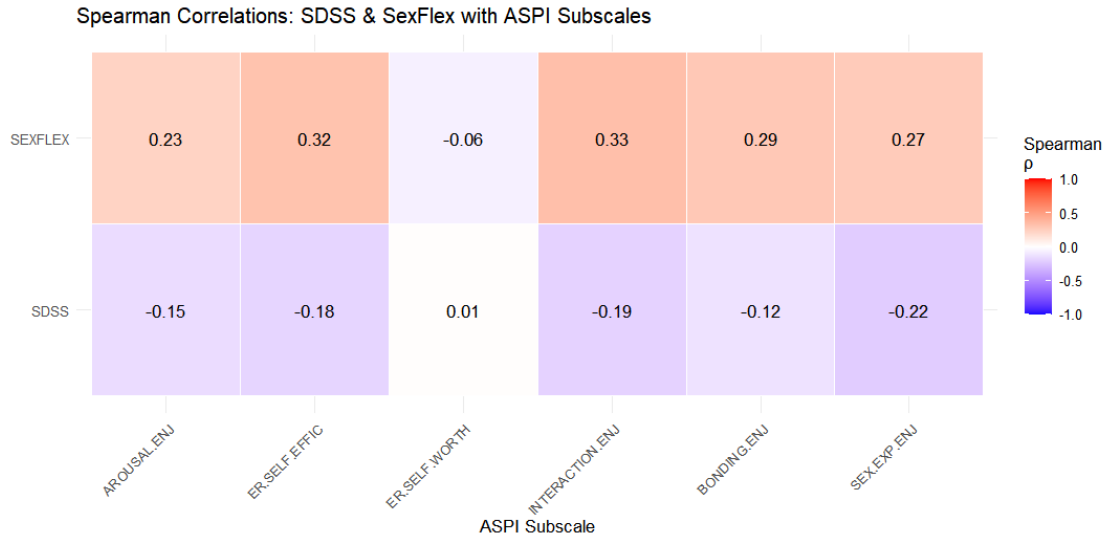
Is there a significant relationship between the degree of flexibility of sexual scripts and the experience of sexual pleasure in heterosexual couples?

To investigate the association between the variables, a Spearman correlation analysis was performed. The results indicated that the association between sexual script flexibility and sexual pleasure was statistically significant for the subscales Arousal Enjoyment (ρ= 0.23 and $p < 0.05$), Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy (ρ= 0.32 and $p < 0.05$), Interaction Enjoyment (ρ= 0.33 and $p < 0.05$), Bonding Enjoyment (ρ= 0.29 and $p < 0.05$) and Sexual Experience Enjoyment (ρ= 0.27 and $p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that participants who reported diverse and flexible sexual scripts, reported a higher level of sexual pleasure (across these dimensions). Enjoyment-Related Self Worth shows a rather neglectable negative correlation (ρ= -0.06 and $p > 0.05$), which is not statistically significant. Therefore, our hypothesis was partially confirmed. Table 5 presents a heatmap visualizing the pattern and strength of the Spearman correlations between the SexFlex and the ASPI-subscales.

Table 4. Spearman correlations between sexual script (flexibility) and sexual pleasure (N=518)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	1. SEXUAL SCRIPT	-							
	2. SEXUAL SCRIPT FLEXIBILITY	-0.10	-						
ASPI SUBSCALES	**3. AROUSAL ENJOYMENT**	-0.15*	0.23*	-					
	4. ENJOYMENT-RELATED SELF EFFIC	-0.18*	0.32*	0.49	-				
	5. ENJOYMENT-RELATED SELF-WORTH	0.01	-0.06	-0.16	-0.31	-			
	6. INTERACTION ENJOYMENT	-0.19*	0.33*	0.58	0.51	-0.17	-		
	7. BONDING ENJOYMENT	-0.12*	0.29*	0.43	0.44	-0.26	0.52	-	
	8. SEXUAL EXPERIENCE ENJOYMENT	-0.22*	0.27*	0.59	0.60	-0.14	0.56	0.41	-

Table 5. Heatmap (N=518)



Multiple regression analysis controlling for educational level and gender

Following the correlation matrix, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the unique contributions of sexual scripts (SDSS) and sexual script flexibility (SexFlex) to each of the six ASPI subscales, while controlling for gender and education level. The standardized regression coefficients, which allow for comparison of relative predictor strength across variables, along with their significance levels and the explained variance (R^2), are presented in Table 6. SDSS and SexFlex were entered simultaneously as predictors, along with dummy-coded variables for gender and education. The reference category for gender was “man” and for education, the “higher education” level.

SDSS showed significant negative associations with five of the six subscales, most notably with Arousal Enjoyment (β = –0.112, $p < 0.01$), Interaction Enjoyment (β = –0.149, $p < 0.001$) and Sexual Experience Enjoyment (β = –0.174, $p < 0.0001$). For ER Self-Efficacy (β = –0.103, $p < 0.05$) and Bonding Enjoyment (β = –0.098, $p < 0.05$), SDSS also showed significant negative effects. No significant association was found between SDSS and ER Self-Worth (β = +0.029, $p > 0.05$).

SexFlex significantly predicted higher scores on Arousal Enjoyment (β = 0.239, $p < 0.0001$), ER Self-Efficacy (β = 0.317, $p < 0.0001$), Interaction Enjoyment (β = 0.326, $p < 0.0001$), Bonding Enjoyment (β = 0.295, $p < 0.0001$) and Sexual Experience Enjoyment (β = 0.289, $p < 0.0001$). No significant association was found between SexFlex and ER Self-Worth (β = –0.054, p= 0.223).

Gender was unrelated to most outcomes, except for Bonding Enjoyment, where women scored significantly higher than men (β = 0.148, $p < 0.001$). Education level had limited impact; only participants with secondary education showed significantly lower Self-Efficacy scores compared to the higher education group (β = –0.148, $p < 0.01$) (reference group), and two marginal trends were observed for ER Self-Worth (p = 0.085) and Bonding Enjoyment (p= 0.087).

Table 6. Multiple regression analyses controlling for gender and education (standardized coefficients)

Predictor	AROUSAL_ENJ	ER_SELF_EFFIC	ER_SELF_WORTH	INTERACTION_ENJ	BONDING_ENJ	SEX_EXP_ENJ
SDSS	–0.112 **	–0.103 *	+0.029	–0.149 ***	–0.098 *	–0.174 ****
SEXFLEX	+0.239 ****	+0.317 ****	–0.054	+0.326 ****	+0.295 ****	+0.289 ****
Gender (woman)	+0.020	+0.036	–0.059	–0.049	+0.148 ***	–0.045
Education (sec.)	–0.034	–0.148 **	+0.098 †	+0.035	–0.092 †	–0.047
Education (uni)	+0.017	–0.005	+0.080	+0.022	–0.049	+0.010
Explained variance (R^2)	0.077	0.133	0.012	0.145	0.122	0.130

Note. *$p < .05$ (), $p < .01$ (**), $p < .001$ (**), $p < .0001$ (****); † indicates a marginal trend ($p < .10$).*

Interaction effects

Since the multiple regression analysis indicated that gender significantly predicted the ASPI subscale Bonding Enjoyment and that educational level predicted ER Self Efficacy, we examined whether the effects of SDSS and SexFlex on Bonding Enjoyment and ER Self-Efficacy varied by respectively gender and education level. Therefore, interaction terms were included in the regression model (Table 7).

Model 1

The first model revealed no significant interaction between SDSS and gender (β = –0.073, $p = 0.792$), nor between SexFlex and gender (β = 0.027, $p = 0.174$). No significant main effects were found for SDSS, SexFlex or gender.

Model 2

The interaction terms of SDSS with secondary (β = 0.415, $p = 0.194$) and university education (β = 0.368, $p = 0.225$) were not significant, indicating no meaningful moderation by education on the negative effect of SDSS on ER Self-Efficacy (β = –0.575, $p = 0.017$). The interaction between SexFlex and education was not significant, suggesting the positive association between SexFlex and ER Self-Efficacy (β = 0.039, $p = 0.016$) was consistent across educational levels.

Table 7. Interaction effects of gender and education on Bonding Enjoyment and ER Self-Efficacy

Model / Predictor	β	p
Model 1 - Bonding Enjoyment		
SDSS	–0.217	0.375
Gender (woman)	–0.108	0.767
SEXFLEX	+0.031	0.082†
SDSS × Gender (woman)	–0.073	0.792
SEXFLEX × Gender (woman)	+0.027	0.174
Model 2 - ER Self-Efficacy		
SDSS	–0.575	0.017*
DEMO: Secondary education	–0.775	0.057†
DEMO: University education	–0.679	0.057†
SEXFLEX	+0.039	0.016*
SDSS × Secondary education	+0.415	0.194
SDSS × University education	+0.368	0.225
SEXFLEX × Secondary education	+0.021	0.341
SEXFLEX × University education	+0.031	0.118†

Discussion

The results showed that in this dataset, traditional sexual scripts are significantly associated with lower sexual pleasure on the following subscales: Arousal Enjoyment, Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy, Interaction Enjoyment, Bonding Enjoyment and Sexual Experience Enjoyment. No significant associations were found for the subscale Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth. The same subscales - Arousal Enjoyment, Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy, Interaction Enjoyment, Bonding Enjoyment, and Sexual Experience Enjoyment - were positively correlated with sexual script flexibility. Again, with the exception of the subscale Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth.

To further explore the relationships between traditional sexual scripts, script flexibility, and various dimensions of sexual pleasure, additional analyses were conducted that accounted for potential demographic influences, such as gender and educational level. This step was taken to assess the unique predictive power of each construct while accounting for potential confounding effects. Previous research has shown that gender is often associated with variations in sexual scripts, gender roles and communication (Ward et al., 2022; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Masters et al., 2012; Bonell et al., 2022; Littleton & Axsom, 2003e). In addition to the theoretical rationale, differences across gender and education groups underscored the importance of accounting for their potential influence when examining the relationship between sexual scripts and pleasure. Additionally, the sample provided sufficient variability across these groups to warrant for their inclusion, ensuring control for potential confounding effects. The regression results largely confirmed the correlational findings (see further).

Sexual scripts – sexual pleasure

The significant negative correlations found between traditional sexual scripts and sexual pleasure in the correlational analyses were also supported by group differences in Table 3. Participants with more egalitarian sexual scripts (SDSS) scored higher on subscales Enjoyment-Related Self-Efficacy, Interaction Enjoyment and Sexual Experience Enjoyment, compared to those with more traditional scripts. The regression results also aligned with this; the SDSS continued to show negative associations with most ASPI subscales. This indicates that strong adherence to traditional sexual scripts predicts lower sexual pleasure, even after controlling for education and gender. The absence of meaningful interaction effects with gender and educational level (Table 7) further reinforces the robustness of the observed associations (specifically with

Bonding Enjoyment and ER Self-Efficacy), suggesting that these relationships hold consistently across demographic groups.

Despite the relatively low correlation coefficients, the associations between sexual scripts and sexual pleasure remained statistically significant, both in the correlational analyses and in the multiple linear regression models. This suggests that the correlations, although modest in strength, are consistent and meaningful. In psychological and social science research, small effect sizes are common due to complex and multifactorial nature of human behaviour, yet they can still have theoretical and practical relevance.

Previous studies have suggested a general movement towards a more egalitarian sexual script (Ortiz-Torres et al., 2003; Segal, 1994) contending that femininity has evolved beyond traditional ideas of passivity and receptiveness to male advances in sexual interactions. This includes behaviours as assertiveness in initiating sexual encounters, seeking pleasure, persuasion and negotiating safe sex practices (Anderson & Aymami, 1993; Anderson & Sorensen, 1999; Exner et al., 2003; Kamen, 2000; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992, 1993, 1996). However, this study revealed that the sexual scripts were mostly characterized by traditional views (Table 2). This is aligned with the findings that a significant number of men and women still engage in culturally prevalent narratives that align with traditional gender norms (Ortiz-Torres et al., 2003; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Wagner et al., 2001; Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Although participants generally reported high levels of sexual pleasure (Table 2), a negative correlation with SDSS emerged. This may have led to a ceiling effect in ASPI responses, where many participants strongly agreed with pleasure-related statements, leaving limited room for variation. Small but meaningful differences in ASPI-scores – slightly lower among those with more traditional sexual scripts – may still produce a significant negative association. Moreover, this study did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the sexual scripts of men and women (Table 3).

The commitment to a conventional and heteronormative sexual framework is defined by phallocentric demands and a male-centric emphasis on sexual satisfaction (Harvey et al., 2023). Consequently, our results align with studies that underscore the enduring impact of heteronormative sexual frameworks in influencing sexual pleasure experiences and sustaining the pleasure gap (Harvey et al., 2023). In contrast to prior studies (Laan et al., 2021), that emphasize that women tend to have a significantly less favourable experience of sexual activity compared to men, this study found otherwise. Only one statistically significant difference was observed in the average reported sexual pleasure between men and women. Specifically, women scored higher than men on the *Bonding Enjoyment* subscale (Table 3). Other dimensions did not

yield statistically significant results. The average reports of sexual pleasure in this study were notably high (Table 2). While this may in part reflect genuinely positive sexual experiences – especially in a context where increasing attention is being paid to female sexual empowerment and autonomy – it is also possible that given the predominantly female composition of the sample, social desirability may have played a role in shaping responses (King, 2022). In contemporary society, where female sexual empowerment is increasingly valued and publicly expressed, some participants may have felt a subtle pressure to report higher levels of pleasure in line with these evolving norms. Additionally, individuals who choose to participate in sexuality research are often more open, communicative and invested in sexual well-being, which in itself can contribute to more fulfilling sexual experiences. These factors may help explain the overall high levels of reported sexual pleasure, without discounting their authenticity.

Sexflex – sexual pleasure

Significant positive correlations were found between sexual script flexibility and sexual pleasure on all ASPI subscales except one. The regression results also showed that SexFlex had consistent and robust positive associations with nearly all subscales, with standardized beta values ranging from 0.239 to 0.326. These findings support the hypothesis that greater sexual flexibility enhances the likelihood of experiencing sexual pleasure. Only the ER Self-Worth subscale did not show a significant effect, potentially due to measurement issues as noted in prior research (Borgmann et al., 2025). The interaction terms (gender and educational level) were also not significant (Table 7), indicating that the positive relationship between SexFlex and sexual pleasure (specifically Bonding Enjoyment and ER Self-Efficacy) appears to be generally stable across gender and educational groups.

Our results are consistent with the study conducted by Bouchard et al. (2023), which indicated that enhanced adaptability in sexual scripts could contribute to the maintenance of sexual well-being when faced with common sexual challenges. Numerous other studies (Gauvin & Pukall, 2017; McInnis & Pukall, 2022; Yessick et al., 2022) also highlight the beneficial effects of sexual flexibility on sexual health, although they predominantly address coping with problems.

This study conceptualizes sexual pleasure as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, consistent with the framework established by Goldey et al. (2016), which identifies hedonic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of sexual pleasure. The subscales of the ASPI correspond to an extent to these different facets of sensual pleasure, mastery and validation related to pleasure, as well as interaction and bonding pleasure. By analysing these subscales separately, this study allows for a more nuanced understanding of how sexual scripts and

flexibility relate to different layers of sexual pleasure. This approach supports the idea that sexual well-being is not a unitary experience but shaped by various personal and relational dynamics. Considering the suggestions put forth by the authors of ASPI Vol. 1.0 (Borgmann et al., 2025), it is essential to critically assess the subscales of Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth and Interaction Enjoyment due to concerns regarding their validity. The Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth subscale exhibited a barely modest internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.54$) and lacked any statistically significant correlations (for both hypotheses), rendering it difficult to draw conclusions about this particular subscale. In contrast, the Interaction Enjoyment subscale demonstrated strong reliability and a statistically significant correlation (for both hypotheses), although conclusions should be approached with caution.

Overall, after also implementing potential moderating factors such as gender and educational level, the findings indicate that, across demographic subgroups, both traditionally and flexibility in sexual scripts play a significant role in shaping sexual pleasure.

Strengths and limitations

The quantitative research framework enables the examination of particular hypotheses and the assessment of distinct relationships between the variables of sexual script (flexibility) and sexual pleasure. It aids in identifying and quantifying the strength and direction of correlations by converting these concepts into measurable items and applying statistical methods to them. This methodology also enhances the potential to generalize findings to a wider population.

The sample size (N=518) significantly exceeded the minimum required sample size determined by the power analysis (N=84), thereby enhancing the statistical power of the results. Despite some correlations being relatively low, they were deemed valuable due to the substantial sample size. However, the majority of respondents was female (84%) (Table 1). This lower male response rate might be attributed to social taboos around men discussing sex openly. Another hypothesis could be that the audience of the author's TikTok content is predominantly female. These factors could possibly pertain this lower male response rate, giving greater weight to the women's responses since they are more represented in the study. The disproportionate representation of women could adversely affect the generalizability of the findings, as the sexual attitudes and experiences of women might be different from those of men (Harvey et al., 2023; Laan et al., 2021). However, as indicated in Table 3, the significant differences between the male and female groups across various measures were minimal, occurring only on one subscale of the ASPI.

Although men were underrepresented in the sample (16%), their numbers (N= 81) were still close to the threshold established by the initial power analysis (84). This allowed for meaningful inclusion in the analyses, although statistical power for detecting male-specific effects was more limited. Gender was included as a covariate in the regression models to control for its potential influence and interaction terms between gender and both traditional sexual scripts and sexual script flexibility were tested. These interaction effects were non-significant, suggesting that the observed associations between sexual scripts and sexual pleasure did not differ meaningfully between men and women. Nevertheless, due to the relatively smaller male subgroup, caution is warranted when interpreting findings specific to this group.

Another discrepancy within the participant pool is that the predominance of participants enjoyed higher education. This factor may skew the data, leading it to reflect a more progressive stance and exhibiting a bias towards sex positivity. This is aligned with our findings (Table 3); people with university education reported more egalitarian sexual scripts than people with secondary education.

Inclusivity is a crucial concern in sex research and represents a key limitation of this study. Populations such as queer individuals and those practicing consensual non-monogamy (CNM) are often underrepresented, in part because many existing research tools are developed within heteronormative frameworks (Borgmann et al., 2025). While the study openly addressed gender, providing options for gender identity beyond the binary, it ultimately focused on heterosexual couples. This was a deliberate choice, grounded in the nature of the sexual double standard, which is predominantly embedded in heterosexual, gender-normative contexts (Emmerink et al., 2017; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2013). Furthermore, as mentioned before, the questionnaires utilized in this research were tailored specifically for heterosexual participants, consistent with the heteronormative context of the sexual double standard. Focusing on heterosexual dynamics allowed for a conceptually coherent investigation of how traditional sexual scripts relate to sexual pleasure. Although heteronormative gender norms may also affect non-heterosexual individuals, their influence and manifestation can vary considerably (Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2013). While acknowledging that non-binary and queer individuals are also affected by these norms, this study positions itself as a necessary starting point for further inclusive research into how such dynamics unfold across a broader spectrum of identities and relationship forms (Murray, 2017).

Beyond the study's focus on heterosexual participants, further limitations concern other aspects of intersectionality, such as social class, religion and ethnicity. The research took place in Flanders, Belgium, but did not collect specific data on these topics. One might hypothesize

that a significant portion of the participants were Caucasian and grew up in a western society. Cultural and/or religious differences can significantly influence how sexual norms and practices are understood and expressed. Moreover, recruitment via an online campaign limited participation to individuals with internet access, potentially excluding less digitally connected or socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

As previously noted, there is a limited availability of measurement tools for sexual scripts, which posed challenges in evaluating these scripts within the questionnaire. Ultimately, the SASSY (Assessment of Sexual Standards Among Youth, Emmerink et al., 2017) was identified as the most relevant questionnaire for gaining insights into the nature of sexual scripts, whether traditional or egalitarian. The adapted version; the SDSS (Endendijk et al., 2021) allowed us to evaluate the degree to which individuals adopted a reversed sexual standard, in contrast to the original SASSY version. Although the SASSY was originally developed for youth populations, prior studies have shown its applicability extends to individuals in their twenties (Endendijk et al., 2021; Sawyer et al., 2018). Given this broader use, employing the SDSS in the current study is justified, especially considering the sample's age range (18 - 90 years, M = 27.39), with the majority (75%) aged between 18 and 25. Although a small number of older participants were included in the study, the majority of respondents were young adults. Combined with the fact that the measurement tools were primarily developed for younger populations, this limits the generalizability of the findings to older age groups. While the study was intended to capture a broader age range, the results mainly reflect the experiences of younger individuals.

Sexual pleasure was assessed using the ASPI Vol. 1.0 (Amsterdam Sexual Pleasure Inventory; Borgmann et al., 2025), selected for its comprehensive coverage of cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions of pleasure, in line with recent theoretical models (Werner et al., 2023; Goldey et al., 2016). Unlike earlier instruments that focus on singular aspects - such as sensory experience (Jozkowski et al., 2015; Vigil et al., 2021) or intercourse-based pleasure (Pascoal et al., 2016) - the ASPI includes six distinct subscales, offering a more nuanced understanding of sexual well-being. However, the subscale measuring Enjoyment-Related Self-Worth contributed little across all analyses. It showed weak internal consistency, non-significant group differences and correlations, and accounted for minimal variance (1.2%) in the regression models. These findings raise questions about its conceptual and statistical value, suggesting that its use in future research should be critically reconsidered.

The regression models add explanatory depth to the initial correlational findings by clarifying which predictors remain robust when other variables are held constant. This approach

allowed for a more accurate estimation of the unique contributions of SDSS and SexFlex to sexual pleasure outcomes and strengthens the conclusion that both traditionality and flexibility in sexual script play significant roles in sexual well-being and pleasure. Gender and education level did not significantly moderate the key associations, suggesting these predictors operate similarly across these groups. From a practical perspective, this could imply that interventions aiming to reduce restrictive sexual scripts or enhance flexibility may be broadly applicable across different segments of the population.

Despite the increasing interest in the domains of sexual scripts and sexual pleasure, these areas remain relatively unexplored in scientific research; thus, this study addresses a significant gap in the existing literature. Furthermore, the results are predominantly consistent with earlier research in the domain of sexuality.

Recommendations for future research

In light of the limitations identified in the present study, several directions for future research can be proposed to enhance understanding and inclusivity in the domain of sexual script (flexibility) and pleasure studies.

Broaden research to include diverse populations

Future research should emphasize the inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly queer individuals and those participating in consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships, such as polyamorous arrangements. While the study concentrated on heterosexual couples due to the prevailing heteronormative sexual double standard, it is essential to examine how sexual scripts and pleasure are manifested in various relational contexts. The experiences and interpretations of sexual norms within LGBTQIA+ communities, for instance, may vary considerably and warrant focused exploration. For instance, qualitative methods could offer deeper insight into diverse sexual experiences and perspectives.

Create and validate comprehensive measurement instruments

A notable limitation in current sexual research is the scarcity of validated tools for assessing sexual scripts across diverse populations. Most existing instruments, including the in this study implemented SDSS (Endendijk et al., 2021), are constructed within a gender-binary and heteronormative paradigm. Future research should aim to develop more inclusive measurement tools that accurately reflect the experiences of individuals across a range of gender identities, sexual orientations, as well as other intersectional domains such as class, ethnicity, ability, culture, religion... Future research should also consider exploring sexual script flexibility within

the broader context of overall sexual health, rather than limiting the focus to problematic scenarios.

Adress gender disparities in samples

The current sample exhibited a significant overrepresentation of female participants, which constrains the ability to make definitive conclusions about male respondents. Future investigations should aim to achieve a more equitable gender distribution or consider conducting targeted studies that specifically examine male experiences related to sexual scripts and pleasure. This approach would facilitate more detailed comparisons and enhance the understanding of gender dynamics.

Examine cultural and socio-economic factors

Since this study was conducted within a Flemish context and lacked specific data on ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status, their potential impact on sexual norms and experiences could not be clarified. As mentioned before, future research should adopt intersectional frameworks that consider these concepts, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how sexual scripts and pleasure are expressed across diverse communities.

Investigate age-related differences in sexual scripts

While the SDSS (Endendijk et al., 2021) has been utilized with participants up to their twenties, there is still a lack of understanding regarding the evolution of sexual scripts throughout the lifespan. Limited research exists on this subject (Rutagumirwa & Bailey, 2017; Muruthi et al., 2018), indicating a need for further longitudinal or age-specific studies. Such research could provide insights into how these norms evolve over time, especially concerning life experiences, relationship dynamics, and cultural transformations.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that sexual scripts are meaningfully associated with various dimensions of sexual pleasure. More egalitarian sexual scripts were linked to higher levels sexual pleasure, while more traditional sexual scripts correlated negatively with these outcomes. Sexual script flexibility emerged as an important factor, showing positive associations with sexual pleasure. These findings support the growing body of research suggesting that rigid gender norms can hinder sexual autonomy and satisfaction. Overall, this study highlights the value of egalitarian

and flexible sexual scripts – not only as a matter of social equity but as a foundation for individual sexual health and fulfilment.

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Inleiding

Deze studie analyseert de relatie tussen traditionele seksuele scripts en de flexibiliteit van deze scripts in relatie tot het seksuele plezier dat wordt ervaren door individuen in heteroseksuele partnerschappen. Gezien het tekort aan onderzoek betreffende verschillende dimensies van seksualiteit, voegt deze studie toe aan de groeiende literatuur die het belang onderstreept van een egalitaire blik op gender en een meer flexibele aanpassing van seksuele scripts, wat uiteindelijk de ervaring van seksueel plezier verrijkt.

Methode

Er werd een steekproef van 518 deelnemers geanalyseerd ($M_{leeftijd}$ = 26.03, $SD_{leeftijd}$ = 10.36), voornamelijk bestaande uit jongvolwassenen. Deelnemers vulden gevalideerde vragenlijsten in die de seksuele dubbele standaard (SDSS), seksuele script flexibiliteit (SexFlex Scale) en seksueel plezier (ASPI) meten. De ASPI bestond uit 6 subschalen: Lustopwekking, Genot-Gerelateerde Zelfredzaamheid, Genot-Gerelateerde Zelfwaardering, Interactie Genot, Bindingsplezier en Seksueel Ervaringsplezier. De relaties tussen de SDSS en de ASPI-subschalen, evenals tussen de SexFlex en de ASPI-subschalen, werden onderzocht. Daarnaast werden gemiddelde verschillen tussen verschillende groepen, waaronder geslacht, seksuele scripts en opleidingsniveau, beoordeeld. Na deze analyse werden de verbanden tussen SDSS, Sexflex en ASPI-subschalen verder onderzocht met behulp van een meervoudige regressieanalyse en controlevariabelen, geslacht en opleidingsniveau.

Resultaten

De bevindingen geven aan dat traditionele seksuele scripts samengaan met lagere niveaus van seksueel plezier en dat flexibiliteit van seksuele scripts samenhangt met meer seksueel plezier. Deze correlaties waren significant voor Lustopwekking, Genot-Gerelateerde Zelfredzaamheid, Interactie Genot, Bindingsplezier en Seksueel Ervaringsplezier. Alleen de subschaal Genot-Gerelateerde Zelfwaardering vertoonde geen significante correlaties. Meervoudige regressieanalyse en interactie-effecten toonden aan dat geslacht en opleidingsniveau de verbanden niet significant modereerden, wat suggereert dat deze voorspellers vergelijkbaar werken in deze groepen.

Discussie

Dit onderzoek benadrukt het belang van een egalitair perspectief op genderrollen in seksuele interacties, aangezien traditionele seksuele scripts consistent gekoppeld werden aan minder seksueel plezier, terwijl flexibele scripts geassocieerd werden met meer plezier. Deze bevindingen laten zien hoe rigide genderverwachtingen seksueel welzijn kunnen belemmeren, terwijl een meer inclusieve en adaptieve benadering dit juist ondersteunt. Toekomstig onderzoek zou moeten onderzoeken hoe deze dynamiek zich voordoet in queer gemeenschappen en bij intersectionele identiteiten zoals etniciteit, leeftijd en sociaaleconomische achtergrond, met behulp van aangepaste metingen of kwalitatieve methoden om uiteenlopende ervaringen vast te leggen

GENERATIEVE AI-GEBRUIK

Binnen de opleiding Gender en Diversiteit volgen we de UGent richtlijnen voor een verantwoord gebruik van generatieve AI. Je wordt ook uitgenodigd op Ufora voor het doorlopen van het Ufora-leerpad "Generatieve AI – van leren tot creëren".

De ingevulde versie is een verplichte bijlage bij de masterproef.

Naam: Irena Coetsier **Studentnummer: 01908871**

Gelieve met 'x' aan te duiden wat van toepassing is en vul aan indien nodig.

☐ Ik heb geen GAI-tool gebruikt.

X Ik heb een of meerdere GAI-tools gebruikt.

Welke? ChatGPT, Ahrefs, NotebookLM

Gelieve met 'x' aan te duiden wat van toepassing is, vermeld welk tool(s) je heb gebruikt en omschrijf hoe je de tool(s) hebt gebruikt.

Ik heb een GAI-tool gebruikt als:

X **Ideeënverstrekker** *(bijvoorbeeld: brainstorm met de tool over een bepaald thema, bereid een discussie voor door argumenten te laten genereren, enz.)*

Specifieer GAI-tool(s): ChatGPT, NotebookLM
Omschrijving: inspiratie bij discussie, limitatie en aanbevelingen onderzoek

☐ **Zoekmachine** *(bijvoorbeeld: extra literatuur zoeken over een bepaald onderwerp, enz.)*

Specifieer GAI-tool(s):
Omschrijving:

X **Schrijfassistent** *(bijvoorbeeld: spellings- en typfouten laten verbeteren, een tekst formeler laten schrijven, enz.)*

Specifieer GAI-tool(s): ChatGPT, Ahrefs
Omschrijving: academisch schrijven ondersteunen

X **Ontwerper** *(bijvoorbeeld: maak een nieuwe, unieke afbeelding, enz.)*

Specifieer GAI-tool(s): ChatGPT
Omschrijving: tabellen in Excel/Word helpen opstellen vanuit R output

☐ **Oefentool** *(bijvoorbeeld: gebruik de tool als een buddy en vraag extra uitleg bij specifieke leerstof, vraag om extra oefeningen te maken, enz).*

Specifieer GAI-tool(s):
Omschrijving:

X **Data-analyse** *(bijvoorbeeld: berekenen van data, scatterplot genereren, enz.)*

Specifieer GAI-tool(s): ChatGPT

Omschrijving: ondersteuning bij R-scripts genereren

X **Efficiëntie bevorderen** *(bijvoorbeeld: samenvatten van bestaande teksten, bronnenlijst in APA-stijl zetten enz.)*

Specifieer GAI-tool(s): ChatGPT
Omschrijving: beknopter schrijven van een tekst

☐ **Ik heb de tools op een andere manier gebruikt.**

Specifieer GAI-tool(s):
Omschrijving:

Ik verklaar dat ik

X bovenstaande gegevens naar waarheid heb ingevuld.

X het Ufora-leerpad “Generatieve AI – van leren tot creëren” heb doorlopen.