Title: Implications of sexual scripts on people’s perception of sexual assault

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Introduction: Several studies have examined sexual script theory from an individual's perspective and how it relates to consent, yet few studies have examined how sexual scripts influence others’ judgments about consent. Sexual script theory outlines expected behaviors in a dating context, which describes men as being proactive, such as asking for the date and initiating sexual advances, and women as being reactive and responding in a way that is not sexually aggressive (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). In July of 2012, a user of the online forum Reddit.com posted the following question: “Reddit’s had a few threads about sexual assault victims, but are there any redditors from the other side of the story? What were your motivations? Do you regret it?”, which allowed us to examine personal narratives from perpetrators of sexual assault and the reactions of others. The current study aims to explore whether the adherence to sexual scripts influences the perception of sexual assault.

Methods: We used deductive thematic analysis to examine comments collected from a thread on Reddit.com, an online community where users can submit content and comment on others’ posts. Online forums are becoming more common in qualitative research on sensitive issues. Site users can post anonymously, which reduces social desirability bias compared with face-to-face communication. We separated the narratives into two categories, narratives that included a sexual script and narratives without one. We coded the Redditors’ responses to these narratives to examine whether other users perceived that sexual assault occurred. For example, in one narrative, the man continued to pester the woman about having sex and when she finally gave in, commenters did not consider this to be sexual assault.

Results: Results suggest that when a sexual script is present in a narrative, commenters are less likely to perceive that sexual assault occurred and vice versa.

Discussion: This pattern of findings suggests that sexual scripts imply consent in the minds of third-party online commenters. Future research should focus on educating the general population about what constitutes consent and how to avoid perpetrating sexual assault. These findings could encourage more accurate descriptions of sexual consent.