



The pervasive role of sex mindset: Beliefs about the malleability of sexual life is linked to higher levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and lower levels of problematic pornography use



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ABSTRACT

The present two-study research examined the link between problematic pornography consumption, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction by considering malleability beliefs about sexual life. In *Study 1*, the Sex Mindset Scale was created which measures beliefs about the changeability of sexual life. Exploratory Factor Analyses ($N_1 = 755$) indicated a one-factor structure, Confirmatory Factor Analyses ($N_2 = 769$) consolidated the previously established factor structure and the measure was reliable. In *Study 2* ($N_3 = 10,463$), structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to explore the associations between gender, sex mindset, problematic pornography use, relationship and sexual satisfaction. The examined model showed that growth sex mindset had moderate positive association with sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction while problematic pornography use only showed a negative, but weak one. According to the present results, beliefs about the malleability of sexual life play a more important role in relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction than problematic pornography use. Moreover, sex mindset was negatively associated with problematic pornography use indicating that growth sex mindset can reduce the extent of problematic pornography consumption. In sum, sex mindset can be considered as an underlying pervasive sexuality-related implicit theory that can influence the individual's topic-relevant thinking and behavior through different pathways.

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In most of the cases, pornography viewing is not problematic; however, it can become problematic and can negatively affect one's life such as problems in romantic relationships as has been reported in previous studies (e.g., Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Ford, Durtschi, & Franklin, 2012; Gwinn, Lambert, Fincham, & Maner, 2013; Pyle & Bridges, 2012; Oddone-Paolucci, Genius & Violato, 2000; Szymanski & Stewart-Richardson, 2014). In the scientific literature, addiction and problematic use are generally used as synonyms; however, it is more proper to use the term “*problematic use*” instead of “*addiction*”, when clinical evidence of an actual addiction cannot be provided (Ross, Mansson, & Daneback, 2012). The definition of problematic online pornography was suggested by Kor et al.'s (2014) which includes the main cores of problematic behaviors (Potenza, 2006; Shaffer, 1999). In their definition four main points were emphasized: (a) the individual engages in online pornography use highly frequently or excessively; (b) prior to the engagement in online pornography use an urge is present

with a goal to avoid negative feelings and emotions or to reach positive emotional state; (c) the person has a decreased self-control regarding the behavioral engagement; (d) and the individual continues to engage in online pornography use despite the negative consequences that can lead to personal distress and functional impairment. Problematic pornography consumption was negatively, but only weakly associated with romantic relationship outcomes such as relationship satisfaction, relationship quality, relationship investment and sexual satisfaction (Blais-Lecours, Vaillancourt-Morel, Sabourin, & Godbout, 2016; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012; Szymanski, Feltman, & Dunn, 2015; Szymanski & Stewart-Richardson, 2014). Moreover, according to a recent experimental study, pornography consumption was positively related to online flirting, “hooking up” behavior and infidelity, and this association was mediated by the extent of commitment (Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012). These results indicated that complex and multivariate associations could be drawn between problematic pornography use and romantic relationship outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. On the basis of previous research, in the present study, we examined the associations between problematic pornography use, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction with the consideration of sex mindset (beliefs

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about the malleability of sexual life) as a pervasive implicit theory of sexuality.

Sexual life is an important aspect of romantic relationships, therefore it can be considered as one of the key contributing factors to relationship satisfaction (Butzer & Campbell, 2008; McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, 2014; Sprecher, 2002). Individuals could use pornography in order to improve their sexual life (Hald et al., 2015; McKee, 2007; Rogala & Tydén, 2003). However, pornography could negatively affect both the individual's sexual life and relationship satisfaction (Blais-Lecours et al., 2016; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012; Szymanski & Stewart-Richardson, 2014; Szymanski et al., 2015). Moreover, the quality of the relationship could be negatively influenced by the perception of the problematic pornography consumption of one's partner (Stewart & Szymanski, 2012). In sum, it can be hypothesized that the association between problematic pornography use and relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction is affected by variables that can be associated with each of these constructs. One possible individual difference that can have an effect on relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction and problematic pornography consumption is the beliefs about the malleability of sexual life.

According to the Mindset theory (Dweck, 2012; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995a, 1995b), human actions can be analyzed and interpreted in the framework of entity theory and incremental theory. According to these implicit theories, people construct different assumptions about the changeability of personal attributes. Individuals characterized by the entity theory (fixed mindset) believe that basic personal attributes (such as intelligence or willpower) are fixed and cannot be changed, although new things can be learnt. On the contrary, in the case of the incremental theory (growth mindset), people believe that these basic attributes can be changed, improved with efforts and good strategies. These implicit beliefs have a great effect on the behavior (Burnette, O'Boyle, Van Epps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013). People's beliefs about the malleability of attributes can play an important part in making more efforts and trying out new strategies in order to develop the given ability (Dweck, 2008; Dweck, 2012; Job, Walton, Bernecker, & Dweck, 2013; Paunesku et al., 2015; Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014). Implicit theories are domain-specific and might include attributes such as intelligence, willpower, or even relationships.

The implicit theories of relationships distinguish between beliefs in romantic destiny or *soulmate theory* and beliefs in relationship growth or *work-it-out theory* (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Knee, 1998; Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). Soulmate theorists believe that relationship partners are meant for each other and they can only have a satisfying relationship if they find this perfectly matching partner. Work-it-out theorists might believe that a satisfying relationship is a result of working on problems and gradually improving the relationship, therefore anyone could be a partner as long as they can work on this relationship. Since previous research (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001) found that soulmate theorists—fixed relationship mindset—are less satisfied with their relationships and they can deal with the negative events more hardly than work-it-out theorists—growth relationship mindset—we expect similar pattern in the case of sex mindset beliefs. People with fixed sex mindset beliefs will be less satisfied with their relationships and sexual life while people characterized with growth sex mindset will be more satisfied with their relationship and sexual life.

Fixed sex mindset beliefs—meaning that one cannot fundamentally change his/her sexual life—implicate less effort to improve sexual life and lower probability of trying new “strategies”. The relative lack of these efforts and the lack of experiencing the effect of new “strategies” might lead to less excitement in the sexual life and as a consequence of the fixed sex mindset belief; it might stabilize the low quality of one's sexual life which might be associated with less satisfaction in the relationship. Another negative consequence of the fixed mindset can be related to pornography use. Pornography can provide an effortless sexual excitement and the person with fixed sex mindset beliefs

does not risk the potential failure of trying out new strategies. We expect an inverse pattern of associations in the case of the growth sex mindset beliefs which are negatively related to problematic pornography consumption while these beliefs are positively related to relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction.

Growth sex mindset includes beliefs regarding the quality of sexual life depend on the efforts of the individual and inclination of seeking new strategies. This belief can improve the quality of the sexual life and these changes in the sexual life can be a source of novelty which has positive impact on relationship satisfaction. Growth sex mindset beliefs could provide sexual novelty via efforts and new strategies and these beliefs reduce the necessity to use pornography which is ready-made and offers immediate novelty. Moreover, these beliefs are related to heightened relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction as a consequence of the effortful and strategy seeking behaviors. Following this logical link, we suppose that the beliefs about the changeability of sexual life are directly related to relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and indirectly related to it through problematic pornography use. It can be hypothesized that fixed sex mindset beliefs play an important role in the maintenance of problematic pornography use, because these beliefs implicate that one's sexual behaviors—such as problematic pornography use—cannot be changed, thus the individual will not make efforts to change the problematic behavior. Thus, this maintained problematic use will contribute to the lower levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction by several processes such as less communication or less sexual intercourse between the partners.

By introducing the concept of sex mindset, the goal of the present study was to have a deeper understanding of the weak negative link between problematic pornography use and relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. This goal was double-folded: in the first study, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were employed to examine the factor structure of a new Sex Mindset Scale assessing beliefs about one's changeability of his/her sexual life. In the second study, using structural equation modeling, a model was created in which sex mindset appeared as a pervasive implicit theory of sexuality behind problematic pornography use, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction controlling for the effect of gender.

1. Study 1

The aim of the present study was to create a Sex Mindset Scale (for the final version, see Appendix 1) with exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (Sample 1) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Sample 2). Specifically, the goal of the present research was to create a scale (1) which can measure beliefs about the malleability of sexual life, (2) which is short, (3) and which has strong psychometric properties in terms of reliability and internal consistency.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Sample 1

Hungarian participants were recruited from social networking sites and diverse online forums in the summer of 2016. Out of the 755 participants, 377 were female (49.9%). They were aged between 18 and 54 ($M_{age} = 22.85$, $SD_{age} = 5.58$). Regarding their place of residence, 279 of them (37.0%) lived in the capital, 115 (15.2%) in county towns, 253 (33.5%) in towns, and 108 (14.3%) in villages. Regarding their level of education, 6 (0.8%) had primary school degree, 115 (15.2%) had ongoing high school studies, 158 (20.9%) had a high school degree, 339 (44.9%) had ongoing higher education studies, and 137 (18.1%) of them had a degree in higher education (bachelor, masters or doctoral). Regarding their relationship status, 329 (43.6%) of them were singles, 405 (53.6%) were in a relationship and 21 (2.8%) were married.

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