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Undergraduates and Sexual Wellness: How Do Undergrads Advocate for Their Sexual Well-Being?

Nikole Babcock

College campuses are often where young adults explore their sexuality and engage in non-committal sexual experiences (Stinson, 2010). The literature surrounding undergraduate sexual behavior is saturated with risky sexual practices and hooking-up (Higgins et al., 2011), yet there is little known about how undergraduates communicate and advocate for their sexual well-being. This study aims to understand better how undergraduates advocate and negotiate for their sexual satisfaction and sexual well-being. A study was conducted with 19 individuals at California State University, Monterey Bay. In order to gather information about the study, a questionnaire was used to investigate sexual satisfaction and well-being in college students. Results indicate that communication may be a key indicator of higher rates of sexual well-being and satisfaction. There was a strong correlation between individuals who rated themselves as having “very comfortable” communication skills and high sexual satisfaction and well-being rates. From these findings, stakeholders can better evaluate how undergraduates communicate and advocate for their sexual well-being and provide evidence-based recommendations for sexual education programs to include a communication aspect to existing courses.

INTRODUCTION

As sex-positivity flourishes in popular culture, it has become dire to understand and teach young people how to advocate for themselves and their sexual well-being. Sexual well-being is defined as sexual satisfaction and sexual self-esteem. Positive sexual health may be the key to dismantling sexual shame, lowering sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates, and leading to higher rates of sexual satisfaction amongst undergraduates (Higgins et al., 2011). An example of positive sexual health may include discussing STI history and birth control methods. Though sexually risky behaviors and sexual health (i.e. HIV, alcohol and drug use, sexual assault) is saturated among scholarly research, there is little research surrounding sexual well-being and undergraduate students (Higgins et al., 2011). College campuses are known to be a place where young adults engage in non-

committal sexual encounters (Stinson, 2010), where a majority of students reported having more positive experiences than negative (Snapp, et al., 2014). Studies have shown that college students were more likely to have positive emotions surrounding hookup experiences if they had a better sense of their sexual self-concept, thus leading to higher rates of sexual satisfaction (Snapp et al., 2014). Sexual self-concept and positive sexual health may be important socialized aspects of a young adult’s relationship with sex, and if these aspects are not introduced or spoken about it may lead to sexual shame and lower rates of sexual satisfaction.

In this study, the term “sexual well-being” is used to encompass both sexual

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satisfaction and sexual self-concept, where self-concept relates to sexual esteem and sexual anxiety (Rostosky et al., 2008). Sexual satisfaction is a nebulous term to define because individuals may have different relationships, or understanding, with the term “satisfaction”. In heterosexual sexual encounters, sexual satisfaction is often defined by the presence of an orgasm. Yet we know that sexual encounters do not always need to have an orgasm to be satisfying. The relationship to the term “satisfying” and orgasms may be intrinsically linked in the minds of undergraduate students. This may be due to young adults not having the proper language to advocate for their sexual pleasure or well-being (Stelzl & Lafrance, 2021). This study will use the constructionist theory as a framework, which implies that sexuality is constructed through sexual experiences and co-exists alongside socially constructed ideologies rather than existing separately (Gavey, 1989; Gavey et al., 1999; Marecek et al., 2004). In other words, sexual scripts are influenced by both culture and personal experiences.

PORNOGRAPHY AND REINFORCING MALE-DRIVEN SEXUAL BEHAVIORS

Pornography is a controversial sexual outlet that is responsible for reinforcing certain socially constructed ideologies surrounding sex. Pornography may even affect sexual scripts, ideologies surrounding sexual attitudes and pleasure, and reinforce sexually coercive behaviors in real sexual experiences (Marshall et al., 2020). There are also other negative attributes about pornography, such as the use of “hostile masculinity” (i.e., violence against women) as a framework used pornography (Marshall et al., 2020) and reinforcing male-focused sexual behaviors (Chadwick et al., 2018). Male focused behaviors may trickle into the sexual scripts of young heterosexual women who engage in sexual behaviors that mirror

pornographic scenes. This may include exaggerated vocalization, engaging in risky physical activities like choking, or even feigning orgasm. Though pornography has been linked to female sexual dissatisfaction, other scholars have found that some women find sexual empowerment and higher rates of sexual gratification (Packard & Schraibman, 1993; Rothman, Kaczmarzky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman, 2015; Weinberg et al., 2010). This may indicate that pornography may be a way for sexual expression. Further research is needed to decipher the weight of pornography’s role in young adults’ sexual well-being and how it influences sexual scripts.

FAKING IT: EVERYONE GETS HURT

Relative to pornography showcasing male-driven sex (Chadwick et al., 2018), society also socializes the ideology that simulating an orgasm is a nicety that should be extended to protect a partner’s ego. Studies have shown (see Stelzl & Lafrance, 2021) that women, in particular, feel the need to “protect,” “care for,” and “not hurt” their male sexual partners, rather than advocate for their sexual satisfaction. The rationale behind faking sexual pleasure stems from wanting to protect masculinity and the male ego, and thus reinforcing the belief that male pleasure should be foremost. It is important to note that simulating orgasm is not strictly a heterosexual or female act. An individual’s sexual script may lead individuals to feign an orgasm, and previous experiences and other socialized aspects may influence this. However, it reinforces the ideology that sex needs to be accompanied by an orgasm to be sexually satisfying (Stelzl & Lafrance, 2021). The idea that orgasm needs to be reached to have a sexually fulfilling experience likely stems from socialization through experiences and media and may add to sexual pressures that may lead to lower sexual self-esteem and anxiety.

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CURRENT STUDY

Sexual well-being is an understudied topic, especially amongst undergraduates. Literature surrounding young women's sexual pleasure is also not well understood by scholars (Higgins et al., 2011). This study aims to understand how undergraduate students negotiate and advocate for their sexual well-being. When there is a mass proliferation of hook-up and dating apps, it is more important than ever to decipher how undergraduates navigate communication and understand their psycho-social sexual attitudes to promote higher rates of sexual wellness. An anonymous questionnaire measured general sexual attitudes, comfortability in advocating for their sexual well-being, and personal rating of sexual well-being. This study adds to the literature surrounding undergraduate students and sexual well-being, while challenging previous research and the constructionist theory.

METHOD

Recruitment and Participants

In this study 18 undergraduate students and one professor participated in a self-report assessment. Participants were drawn from an advanced research methods course. The course had a total of 20 participants (15 females), where 55% identified as Latino, 35% Caucasian, 5% Native American, and 5% Asian. Three participants labeled themselves as bisexual, two questioning, and the remaining identified as heterosexual. Due to attrition, only 19 individuals participated.

Procedure

This study intended to measure undergraduates' ability to negotiate and advocate for their sexual well-being. In order to achieve this, a self-report survey was created using quantitative measures to assess undergraduates' experiences with communication and socialization surrounding sexual

well-being. Questions such as "*highest level of sexual education*" and "*how comfortable do you feel discussing sex with your partner(s)*" were asked of the participants. Sexual scripts were measured by asking participants to assess their behavior using a scale ranging from always, sometimes, and never. Assessments included "*I am honest with my partner(s) when I do not reach orgasm*" and "*I fake orgasms to have the sexual experience end quicker.*" Questions were presented in a multiple-choice and *select all that apply* format.

In order to protect the identity of the participants, the assessments were submitted anonymously. Participants were informed of the potential discomfort some of the questions might cause and were advised to leave such questions blank.

Analysis

In order to measure undergraduate students' abilities to negotiate and advocate for their sexual well-being, a correlational analysis will be conducted to look at the relationship between these variables.

RESULTS

A correlation is the relationship between two or more variables, which can be negative or positive depending on the direction of the plotted data. For example, in figure #6 there is a clear positive correlation. The correlation is positive because as the levels of good communication skills increase, so do the levels of happiness with sexual well-being. In statistics variables may have a relationship, or correlation, but the data must also be statistically significant for the data to hold any merit. Statistical significance is achieved when the "p-value," which in psychology is the value that helps researchers determine the percentage that the statistical data happened by chance, is less than 0.05 (5%).

The relationship between parents discussing sex and comfort level with talking

about sex with a partner was found not to be statistically significant (See figure #1).

Level of sexual education also had no significant relationship with level of comfort with talking about sex with a partner. (See figure #2).

There was a significant correlation between comfort in expressing sexual dissatisfaction with partners and levels of comfort with talking about sex with partners, such that when levels of comfort in discussing sex with partners increases as do levels of comfort in expressing sexual dissatisfaction. (See figure #3).

A significant correlation between comfort in expressing sexual dissatisfaction with partners and honesty when one does not reach orgasm was found. Indicating that when levels of comfort with expressing sexual dissatisfaction decreases, as do levels of honesty when not reaching orgasm. (See figure #4).

In order to authenticate self-reporting in relation to feigning orgasm, levels of communication comfort, and comfort in disclosing sexual dissatisfaction a third set of questions were compared. In this comparison, there was a significant relationship between comfort in discussing sexual pleasure and not faking orgasms for partners' self-esteem, further indicating that when comfort in discussing sexual pleasure increases the need to fake orgasms decreases (See figure #5).

Additionally, there was a large positive correlation between the level of sexual well-being and ability to communicate and advocate for sexual well-being, such that when the level of sexual well-being increases so does the ability to communicate and advocate for sexual well-being. (See figure #6).

DISCUSSION

The United States educational system often teaches youths and adolescents about sex through sexual education. Other forms of

sexual education may also stem from parental or guardian-led conversations. Interestingly, neither form of sexual education seemed to influence the level of comfort when discussing sex with a sexual partner, which may indicate that the constructionist theory may have some flaws. Some of the participants reported having exposure to both or one of the sexual education tactics, which is often how individuals learn about sexual norms. Self-report rates on levels of comfort ranged and because there was no relationship found between sexual education exposure and level of comfort with discussing sex with a sexual partner, this may indicate that sexual experiences may also shape the level of comfort, thus reinforcing the ideology that sexual experiences co-exists alongside socially constructed ideologies rather than existing separately.

Sexual satisfaction is dependent upon many external factors, including communication skills. Participants who reported higher levels of comfort when discussing sex with a partner were found to also have higher rates of comfort in expressing sexual dissatisfaction. To test this sentiment, participants were asked how often they faked orgasms, and the correlation remained, where participants reported not faking orgasms and relaying sexual dissatisfaction. This challenges Stlelzl and Lafrance's study that found that women fake orgasms to protect the ego of their male partners (2021). Participants did not feel the need to protect their partners' egos and felt comfortable in expressing their sexual dissatisfaction.

Communication may be the key to deciphering sexual well-being. There was a strong relationship between the level of sexual well-being and the ability to communicate and advocate for sexual well-being. In other words, those who had a more difficult time expressing their sexual needs or advocating for their sexual well-being reported lower rates of sexual well-being. How-

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ever, individuals who felt more comfortable negotiating and advocating for their sexual well-being reported higher rates of overall sexual well-being. Contrary to the constructivist theory, sexual well-being may in fact be shaped by a myriad of factors. Further research is needed to decipher how sexual health and well-being based communication skills are learned, and the level of important communication skills serve in regards to sexual well-being.

STRENGTHS

There were quite a few strengths in the study. The questionnaire measured exactly what was intended and provided a starting point for future research. Other strengths include a relatively diverse range of ethnicity demographics as well as the inclusion of non-heterosexual sexualities within the participant demographics. Participants were also made aware they could leave the study at any time and their identities have been protected due to the anonymity of questionnaire responses.

LIMITATIONS

The small sample size may have served as a disadvantage and could have potentially skewed the results. Other limitations were the lack of diverse gender, sexual orientation, and racial identities. Future research should include a more diverse sample to have comprehensive and inclusive data that is representative of undergraduate students. Another key limitation was the limited methodology. Qualitative data should be included to get a better scope of diverse experiences and allow for further elaboration, as well as highlight key differences in regard to gender and sexual identity.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To further test the validity of the questionnaire, future research should include a larger population size. It is recommended that diverse gender identities, ethnicities, races, and sexual identities be included in order to generate a representative sample of the undergraduate student population. Future research may also conduct a comparative study highlighting gender and sexual identity difference. It is also recommended that mixed methods, qualitative and quantitative, be used to further explore individual differences and experiences. Qualitative data may offer more insight into psychosexual mental frameworks, sexual self-esteem, and experiences.

CONCLUSION

Sexual scripts are often molded through sexual education, media, experiences, and cultural norms. These scripts influence the way individuals think, talk about, and engage in sexual activities. Sex is often regarded as a physical act, yet we know that neural and emotional factors contribute to the outcome of a sexual experience. This may indicate that communication, education, and experiences may shape the way individuals advocate for their sexual wellbeing. A young adult's attitudes surrounding sex may also be a key indicator of sexual satisfaction and higher rates of sexual well-being (Higgins et. al., 201; Snapp et al, 2014). This study highlighted that communication skills led to higher rates of sexual satisfaction and overall sexual well-being. Stakeholders may conclude that though sexual education is critical in educating individuals about sexual health, there may be a need for a communication component that educates young adults on communicating, advocating, and negotiating how to communicate, advocate, and negotiate for their sexual well-being and satisfaction.

Figure #1

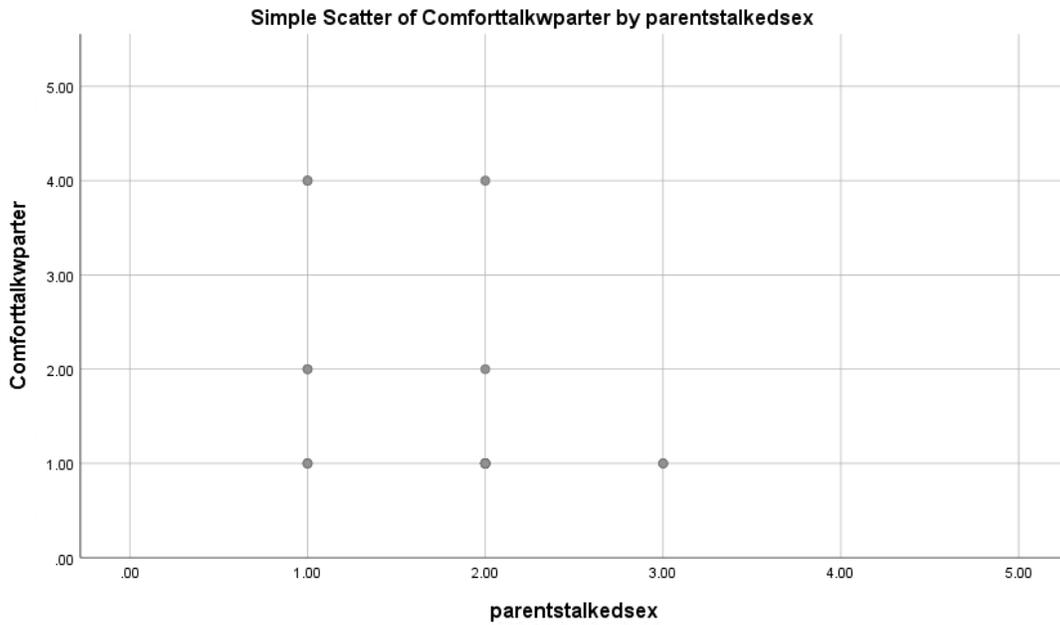


Figure #2

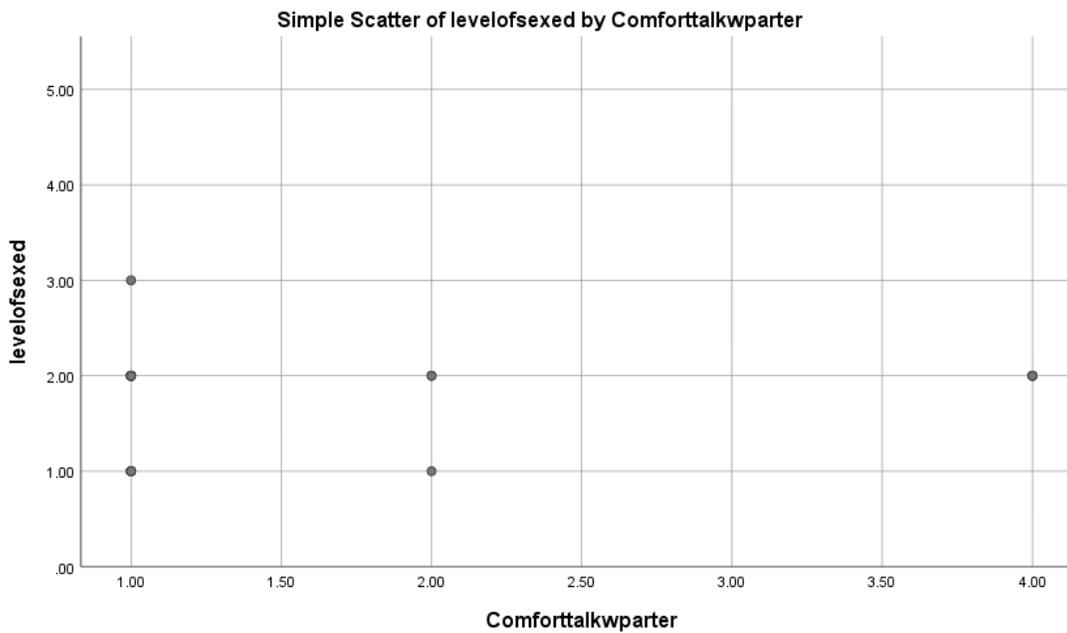


Figure #3

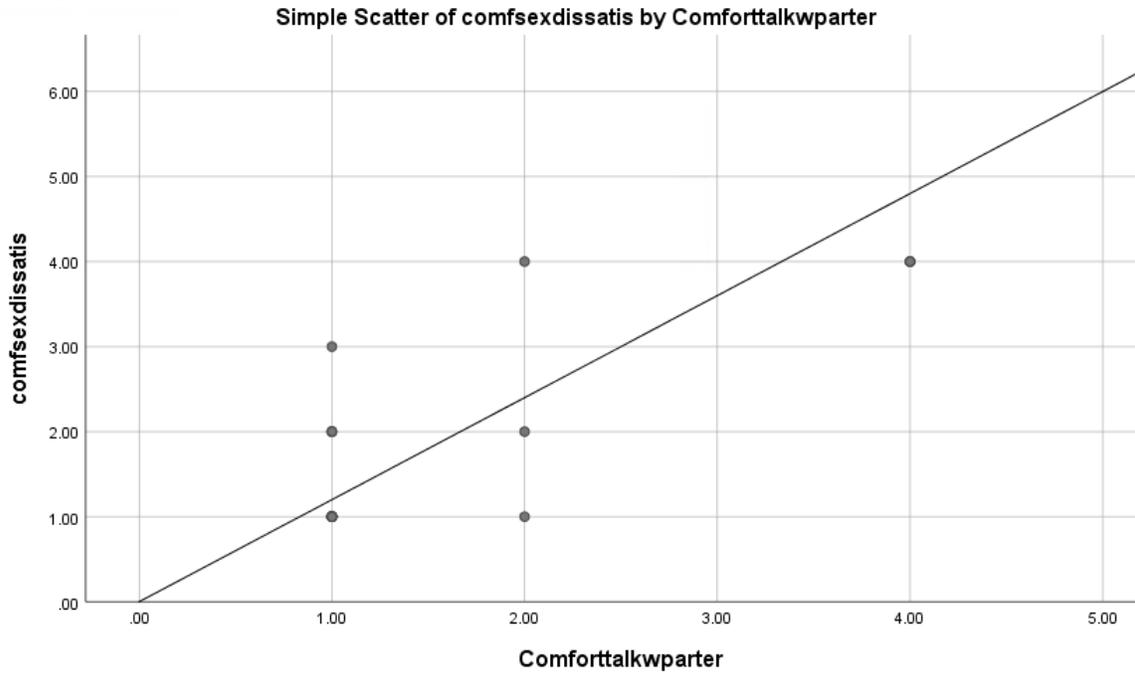


Figure #4

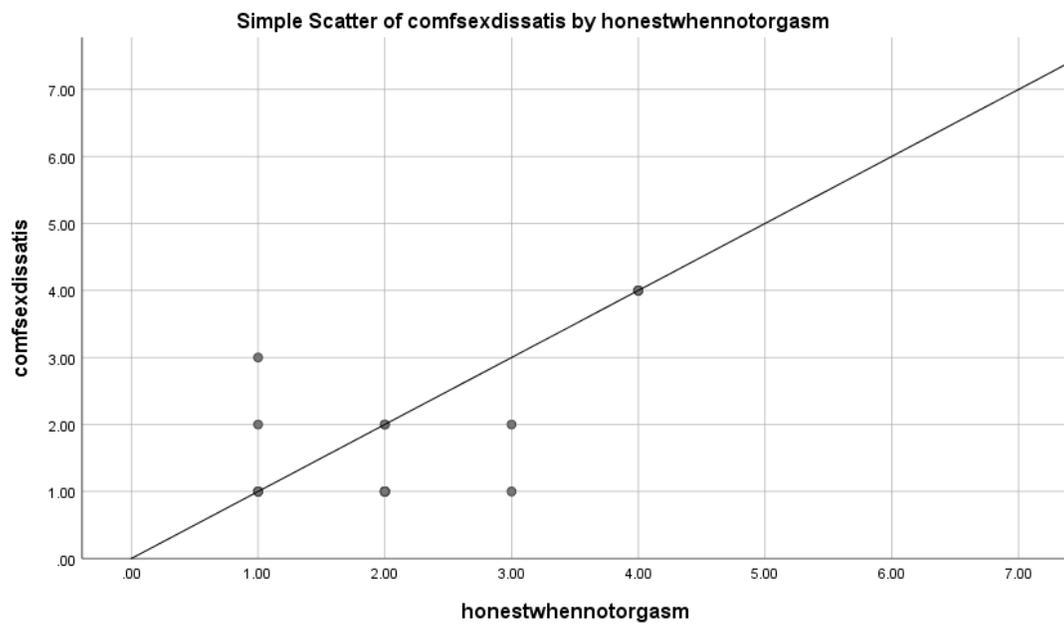


Figure #5

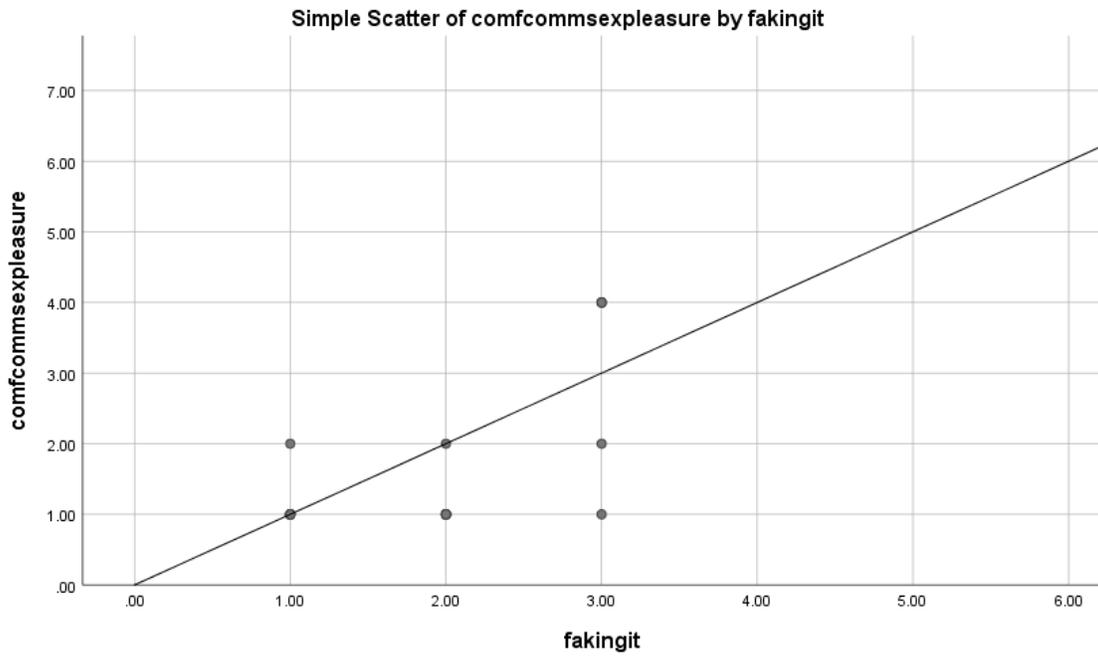
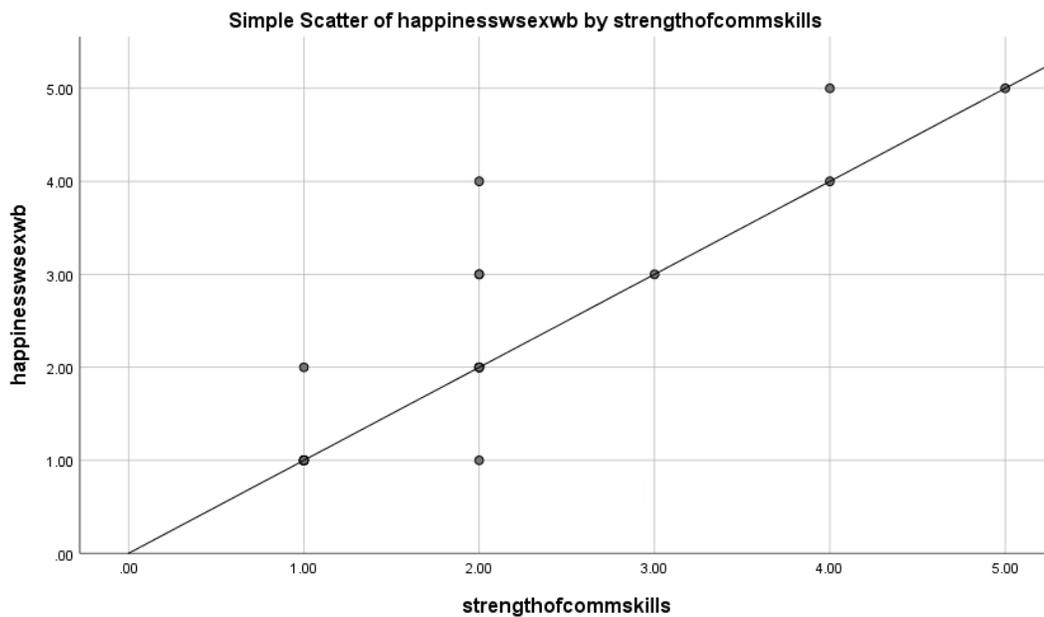


Figure #6



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