

Research Article

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A Wandering Eye: Sexually Explicit Media Usage of MSMs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted lifestyles, including sexual behaviors. With the lack of data on men who have sex with other men (MSM) and their usage of sexually explicit media (SEM), this research focused on examining if COVID had a similar impact in this area as it did with the general population. The researcher administered a survey to a small number ($N = 45$) of participants recruited from an MSM-focused Reddit group. The results indicated that nearly all participants used SEM to some degree, with most reporting pornography usage increased or remained the same during COVID. Dissimilar to other research, the participants largely indicated pornography usage did not impact their sexual encounters. While this was a pilot study, the research may indicate that SEM usage is different in MSM populations.

Keywords: Sexually explicit media; COVID-19; MSM

Abbreviations: Sexually explicit media (SEM); Men who have sex with men (MSM)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted nearly every aspect of people's lives in some fashion [1]. During and even after country lock-down phases, individuals changed their sexual activities to follow public health guidance [2]. Along with the COVID changes, the General Social Survey [3], showed a decrease in adults saying they did not have sex once within the past year—from 23% in both 2016 and 2018 to 26% in 2021. If sexual encounters have gone down because of COVID and other factors, has usage of sexually explicit media (SEM) increased?

Researchers have shown that SEM or pornography usage during the COVID pandemic has increased [4,5]. Lau WKW, et al. [4], examined both Google trends and data from Pornhub during the first four months of the pandemic. They found increased pornography usage during this time. Concurrently, Mestre-Bach G,

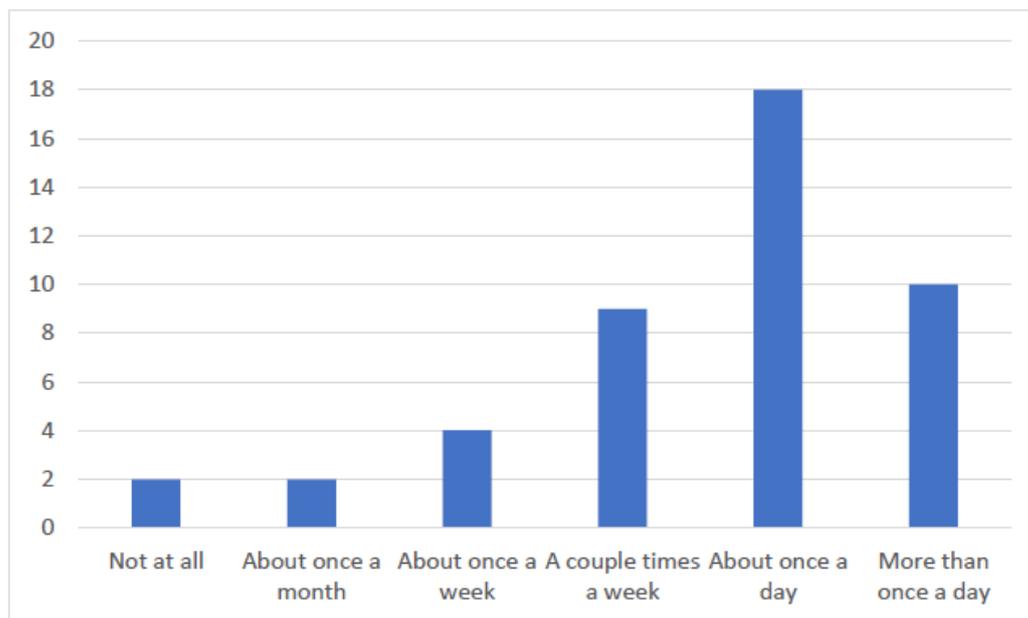
et al. [5], reported an 11% increase in pornography traffic during the first few weeks of many countries' lockdowns (Graph 1).

Multiple studies have shown pornography usage impacts adult males' relationships [6-8]. French & Hamilton [6] found men reported more frequently that pornography usage had negative effects on their sex life. Vanderlaan GA [8], reported pornography usage may negatively impact relationships and decrease sexual intimacy. Other researchers found that pornography usage in early life did not correlate to sexual offending as an adult, which is a commonly held belief [7].

Research on the SEM usage of men who have sex with other men (MSM) space is limited. Erickson DJ, et al. [9], coupled SEM consumption among MSM with "safe sex" practices, finding that the type and frequency of SEM usage related in some degree to

participants' sexual behavior and condom usage. Interestingly, this research found the higher the pornography viewing of condom less

SEM content, the higher likelihood the participant would engage in riskier sexual practices.



Graph 1: Frequency of pornography usage.

Purpose

The current research is a pilot study examining self-reported usage of pornography before and during the COVID-19 pandemic with specific focus on participants who view MSM-focused content.

Materials and Method

Participants

For this pilot study, 54 individuals participated in some aspect of the survey. The research used the data from only the 45 participants who completed the survey for this research. All participants indicated they used "he/him" pronouns. The average age was 27.76 (SD = 9.00) years old.

Measure

The current research used a simple survey with five questions. The two demographic questions asked age and pronouns (with choices of "he/him", "she/hers", "they/them", and "other"). The participants were not asked about their sexual orientation or identity.

The first research question asked frequency of pornography viewing with five choices: not at all; about once a month; about once a week; a couple times a week; about once a day; and, more than once a day. The second asked how pornography usage has changed since the beginning of COVID. This question included four response choices: it has increased; it has stayed the same; it has decreased; and, not applicable/I don't view pornography. The third question asked about how sexual encounters have changed since

using pornography. This question had three choices: my sexual encounters have not changed; my sexual encounters have changed; and, not applicable.

Ethics and Procedure

The Fort Hays State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and exempted the study (IRB: 1874710). The researcher created the survey in Qualtrics and posted it to the r/gaybros sub on February 17, 2022. The r/gaybros sub is "a network built for the LGBTQ+ community", and previous research Challacombe DJ, Perdomo N [10], has found individuals who interact on this sub identified as MSM. The researcher then closed the survey on February 20, 2022, after no additional responses were submitted within 12 hours.

Results and Discussion

The results indicated that most participants viewed pornography with only two indicating they do not. The greatest number of participants indicated they view pornography about once a day.

Participants then indicated how their pornography usage has changed since the beginning of the COVID pandemic. The majority indicated it had increased (N = 23) or stayed the same (N = 14), with only a few indicating it decreased (N = 7) and one indicating they did not view pornography.

Finally, most participants indicated their sexual encounters have not changed (N = 27), with some indicating change (N = 9) and some indicating not applicable (N = 9).

Conclusion

Research on MSM pornography usage is rather limited. This pilot study adds to the research on general population SEM usage during COVID by showing an assumed MSM participant group continued or increased their usage in this time period. Interestingly, most participants in this sample did not indicate a change in their sexual encounters in relation to SEM consumption.

The role of SEM usage in MSM spaces is something that continues to need to be explored. Anecdotally, it is believed that many MSMs learn about sexual behavior primarily from SEM consumption. With the large number of participants indicating some SEM consumption, it is possible that pornography addiction may be a problem in the MSM community. Subsequent research on the topic would prove clinically beneficial if a percentage of MSMs addicted to pornography could be established.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

Author declare no conflict of interest.

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