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Sexually Explicit Online Media, Body Satisfaction, and Partner Expectations Among Men who have Sex with Men: a Qualitative Study

Emily Leickly¹, Kimberly Nelson^{1,2}, and Jane Simoni¹

¹Department of Psychology, University of Washington, Box 351525, Seattle, WA 98195-1525, USA

Abstract

Limited research has investigated the perceived influence of sexually explicit online media (SEOM) on body satisfaction and partner expectations of men who have sex with men (MSM). Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 MSM, covering the perceived influence of MSM-specific SEOM. All nine men who broached the topics of body satisfaction and partner expectations reported that MSM-specific SEOM set unreasonably high physical appearance expectations for themselves and/or their potential partners. Although MSM-specific SEOM might be negatively affecting body satisfaction and partner expectations among MSM, its ubiquity may make it a useful tool to support body positivity.

Keywords

MSM; Body satisfaction; Partner expectations; Sexual minorities; Sexually explicit online media; Pornography

The vast majority of gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) consume MSM-specific sexually explicit online media (SEOM), with estimates ranging from 98–99 % (Duggan and McCreary 2004; Rosser et al. 2013; Stein, et al. 2012). MSM-specific SEOM places more emphasis on the male body than other types of SEOM (Duggan and McCreary 2004). In a qualitative study among MSM by Morrison (2004), discussants described the ideal body as represented by mainstream MSM-specific SEOM as “butch,” “tanned,” “muscular,” and “hairless,” without “[even] an ounce of body fat” (p. 172). When presented with this idealized body, it is possible that some MSM may find themselves lacking: Generally, studies have found that MSM experience greater body dissatisfaction

Correspondence to: Emily Leickly.

²Present address: The Miriam Hospital, Centers for Behavioral and Preventative Medicine, Coro West, Suite 309, 164 Summit Ave, Providence, RI 02906, USA

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

(defined as negative evaluation of one's body or appearance; Cash 2002), shame, and surveillance than heterosexual men (Martins, Tiggemann, and Kirkbride 2007). MSM also believe their physical appearance to be more important to others than heterosexual men (Yelland and Tiggemann 2003). In addition to potentially applying unrealistic physical expectations to themselves, MSM may also apply these expectations to their partners. Judgments about one's own body and one's partner's body are uniquely linked in the realm of MSM-specific SEOM where MSM are both the consumers and the subject of the media.

Although scant research addresses the influence of SEOM on partner expectations among MSM, some literature has examined how the mass media may influence heterosexual men's expectations of attractiveness for female partners. For example, Zurbriggen, Ramsey, and Jaworski (2011) found that, among heterosexual men, consumption of objectifying media was positively correlated with partner objectification, which was associated with lower levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction. Considering MSM-specific SEOM's extreme focus on and objectification of the male body (Duggan and McCreary 2004), MSM may form expectations of what their partners should look like based on men in MSM-specific SEOM and subsequently be more likely to objectify their partners. Inability to find a mate who meets the physical ideal dictated by MSM-specific SEOM may leave some MSM unpartnered, which has been found to be related to a variety of negative mental health outcomes, including depression (Pereira, Nardi, and Silva 2013).

The potential for MSM-specific SEOM to negatively influence body satisfaction and partner expectations among MSM has been relatively unexplored. Considering the high prevalence of SEOM consumption in this population and how little is known about its effects, the paucity of research in this area is striking. In this preliminary study, we explore MSM's perceptions of the relations among MSM-specific SEOM consumption, body satisfaction, and partner expectations.

Method

Qualitative Interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the second author with 16 MSM in a large city in the Pacific Northwest as a part of a larger study on SEOM use and online partner seeking (Nelson et al. 2014b). This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University where the research was conducted. Participants were recruited via MSM-specific email listservs, Facebook groups, and fliers at community organizations in the greater metropolitan area. Eligibility criteria were the following: (1) self-identifying as male; (2) being at least 18 years old; (3) having sex with a man in the last year; (4) having Internet access; (5) accessing an online men-seeking-men website in the past year; and (6) consuming SEOM in the past year. Online partner seeking was an inclusion criteria due to the research focus of the broader study for which these qualitative interviews were primarily conducted.

Interviews ran approximately 60 min, were conducted in a private office, and were digitally recorded. Participants received \$20 for their time. Participants were informed that the interviews would cover topics related to their experiences with SEOM and online partner

seeking. Interviews were conducted using a structured guide with open-ended questions and probes. The style of interview followed a line of qualitative methodologies that allows pre-existing concepts, theories, and findings to inform components of the interview, rather than having data collection and theory be generated exclusively from the interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1994). Specific domains of inquiry included online partner-seeking behaviors, SEOM consumption, and the perceived influence of SEOM on the participants and other MSM in the community. Specific probes queried the influence of SEOM on sexual behaviors, social life, ability to meet men, and feelings of self-worth. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author and reviewed for accuracy by the second author. Using a constant comparison analysis framework (Miles and Huberman 1994), the first two authors reviewed all of the transcripts to identify key constructs, emergent themes, commonalities, and disparities offered by the participants. A coding manual was iteratively developed based on information gleaned from the transcripts, defining general themes and concepts, with sub-codes as needed to specify themes. The interviews were coded by the first author in ATLAS.ti 5.2 (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH) and reviewed on an ongoing basis by the second author. Coding followed an iterative process, such that data from one interview was used to inform the coding of subsequent interviews. The first author would then return to earlier interviews and recode as necessary. Questions about emergent codes and potential discrepancies were raised in regular meetings between the first and second authors. After all coding had been reconciled, the first and second authors extracted illustrative quotes of the predominant themes. The presented results represent a secondary data analysis focusing on the themes of body satisfaction and partner expectations that arose during the section of the larger interview examining the perceived influence of MSM-specific SEOM. Selected quotations are included to illustrate key points.

Participants

The 16 participants had a mean age of 42 years (range = 24–73; SD = 3.14). Twelve were Caucasian American, eight had a household yearly income of more than \$30,000, 11 had an associate's degree (approximately 14 years of education) or higher level of education, 12 self-identified as gay, 14 did not currently have a primary partner, and two reported being HIV-seropositive. Although all 16 participants reported using SEOM in the past year during screening, 12 volunteered information about the frequency of the SEOM use during the qualitative interview. Out of these 12, seven reported daily use, three reported viewing SEOM 2–5 days per week, and one reported viewing SEOM twice a year.

Results

When participants were asked how they feel MSM-specific SEOM influences them, two significant themes emerged: (1) detrimental effects on body satisfaction and (2) specific expectations about potential partners. These themes were spontaneously brought into the conversation by nine interviewees and were not brought up by the other seven interviewees. Among these nine men, seven described negative experiences of comparing their body to those in SEOM, feeling that SEOM set a difficult-to-attain expectation for their appearance.

Some men directly compared their bodies to those of men in SEOM, feeling that this self-comparison lowered their sense of self-worth:

Oh, it completely lowers [my sense of self-worth]. Because I do not look like any of those guys in the porns that I'm attracted to. (Caucasian American, 42 y.o [years old])

If I find some porn that's some guys that I would consider average looking guys, I'm like, I actually feel kind of good about myself. But if it's porn where I'm clicking through it, it'll all like the six pack abs, and they're completely hairless... I'm like, oh my god. On one hand this is depressing, on the other hand it's like that's what I want to look like. (Caucasian American, 29 y.o.)

I definitely know that I don't look anything like the guys in the porn. And even the average guys who come in off the street. They're all much skinnier than I am. (Latino American, 24 y.o.)

I know that porn, for the longest time, really created a lot of bad body images for myself. Because I'm not a jock, I'm not in the greatest shape, and I don't know if you noticed, but everyone in porn seems to be pretty good looking. (Caucasian American, 44 y.o.)

Other participants described MSM comparing their bodies to men in SEOM as a larger phenomenon with a negative impact on other MSM:

You do have to realize that it is a fantasy world and you're not going to stack up to that. It's not humanly possible. So if they're unable to make that distinction then it wouldn't be good for their self-worth. (Caucasian American, 52 y.o.)

Certainly in the beginning, I think, one of the negative impacts that I think porn had was making everybody feel inadequate, either for size of penis, or their looks, or whatever. Just their bodies. (Caucasian American, 47 y.o.)

I think younger guys who think they need to have perfect bodies look at porn, and they see an ideal to go for. Or, a lot of the guys who do porn have bigger cocks. So, I think in some ways it makes us feel a little insecure if we're a little more average. (Caucasian American, 42 y.o.)

Five of the nine men who discussed these topics explained that SEOM set an expectation for potential partners to be extremely physically attractive. Some participants directly referenced seeking partners who look like men in the SEOM they consume, feeling that SEOM gave them an inaccurate perception of what average men look like:

Because I have spent a lot of time trying to attract young and good-looking men, just like in the porn I've been looking at for so many years. And I've noticed that when I'm looking at someone it always tends to be someone that is much younger and in very good shape. (Caucasian American, 44 y.o.)

If you're constantly looking at the amazing perfect tens, when somebody who's not a perfect 10 comes along you might discount them. Because they're not the thing

that I'm always looking at. And actually I've had a problem with this. (Caucasian American, 42 y.o.)

I mean, it does [influence my partner standards] a little way that you're like "alright, that's a really hot guy, that's sort of what I would like. I'd like to find somebody who looks like that, or is built like that." (Caucasian American, 42 y.o.)

I think some of it [porn] gives me an unrealistic view on what real people look like. Because people in porn, especially the muscled porn, are guys who are very toned and work out a lot. That's not as common as people would like it to be. So it gives you kind of a false hope that you're gonna find somebody, necessarily, who looks as good as that all the time. (Latino American, 29 y.o.)

Another participant described looking for extremely attractive partners based on SEOM standards as practiced by other MSM in the larger community:

I think people want those porn[stars]... and then the average people can't, they're not able to get anybody. You don't look like a porn star, you know. (Black/African American, 35 y.o.)

Discussion

This preliminary qualitative study illuminates MSM's perceptions of the ways that MSM-specific SEOM may influence MSM's body satisfaction and partner expectations. In this study, participants reported that the presence of highly attractive men in MSM-specific SEOM results in some MSM feeling insecure and inadequate about their own appearances. Additionally, participants noted that the high expectations set by MSM-specific SEOM for how a partner should look result in some MSM having difficulties finding a partner who conforms to MSM-specific SEOM-based expectations.

Although this paper focuses on MSM's perceptions of some of the potential negative effects of MSM-specific SEOM on MSM's body satisfaction and partner expectations, it is important to note that SEOM consumption has been associated with many positive effects, including helping MSM increase their knowledge about sex between men (Hald, Smolenski, and Rosser 2013; Kubicek, Carpineto, McDavitt, Weiss, and Kipke 2011; Nelson et al. 2014); become more comfortable with their sexuality (Nelson et al. 2014a); seek friendships and sexual partners (Kubicek et al. 2011); and potentially validate attraction and create a community (Hald et al. 2013). It may be possible to capitalize on these positive effects while also attempting to decrease the potential negative impact of MSM-specific SEOM on body satisfaction and partner expectations.

The degree of subjectivity inherent to qualitative research presents a limitation to this study, wherein potential bias may exist during the interview and coding processes. Maintaining strict consistency across interviews in regards to phrasing and order of questions can be challenging. Participants were allowed to spontaneously introduce the issues of body satisfaction and partner expectations; they were not explicitly probed on these issues. Thus, the opinions of participants who did not introduce these topics during their interviews are unknown. Additionally, the one-on-one interaction with the interviewer during data

collection may affect the interviewee's responses. Generalizability is also a limitation, given the mostly Caucasian, urban, and educated sample. The findings, then, represent a preliminary depiction of issues related to MSM-specific SEOM consumption and may not generalize to all MSM.

Despite these limitations, and although this study is preliminary in nature, it raises potential policy implications. Since MSM-specific SEOM is perceived as ubiquitous in the MSM community (Rosser et al. 2013), and it is hypothesized that many young MSM use it as a learning tool (Kubicek et al. 2011), SEOM could be an opportune vehicle with which to display and support body positivity. Despite MSM reporting that sexually explicit media is an acceptable venue for sex education and HIV-prevention messages targeting MSM (Wilkerson, Iantaffi, Smolenski, Horvath, and Rosser 2013), we are unaware of any research investigating the medium as a space to present messages encouraging body satisfaction and more realistic partner expectations by depicting men with varied body types as attractive and desirable. Such research could help inform potential regulations for the MSM-specific SEOM industry that would seek to increase the diversity of bodies presented in the media and even potentially integrate specific body-positive messages.

As it is unlikely that MSM-specific SEOM industry will accommodate the integration of more diverse body types and body-positive messages without sustained pressure from influential outside policy groups, a more effective tactic may be to help MSM become better-informed consumers of MSM-specific SEOM. Media literacy interventions examining sexual content have been shown to positively affect sexual health and communication behaviors among heterosexuals (Pinkleton, Austin, Chen, and Cohen 2013; Scull, Malik, and Kupersmidt 2014); these techniques could be extended or modified for MSM to include MSM-specific SEOM. Media literacy interventions targeting MSM-specific SEOM could educate MSM about the power of media to shape norms, examine the intent and biases of media producers, and equip MSM to better evaluate messages presented by MSM-specific SEOM in context of their own experiences and beliefs.

Media literacy information may be particularly effective for MSM when presented in conjunction with health literacy materials (Nelson and Carey 2016), either in widely distributed public health campaign materials (CDC 2016; Snyder et al. 2004), or on an individual level paired with counseling or community services (Scull, et al. 2014). An individual level media literacy intervention could involve an assessment of the participant's SEOM viewing habits (e.g., characteristics of MSM-specific SEOM consumed). Based on this assessment, a MSM-specific SEOM literacy intervention tailored to the individual's pre-existing level of media literacy could be provided.

The reach and acceptability of MSM-specific SEOM in the MSM community may aid in wide dissemination of body-positive messages, making SEOM an avenue worthy of exploration for such an intervention. Media literacy may also be an important component in mitigating any potential negative effects of MSM-specific SEOM on body satisfaction and partner expectations. Future studies should examine potential mediators of the associations between SEOM, body satisfaction, and partner standards perceived by MSM in the present study to further knowledge of the issue and lend research-based support to the creation and

implementation of public health interventions. As this research is still in the preliminary stages, future research will need to assess the feasibility and acceptability of including more varied body types in MSM-specific SEOM, as well as media literacy education focused on MSM-specific SEOM.

Conclusion

This preliminary qualitative exploration of the perceived influence of MSM-specific SEOM revealed that MSM-specific SEOM may be having a detrimental effect on body satisfaction and partner expectations among MSM. Ultimately, researchers and public health advocates may be able to use the ubiquity and reach of MSM-specific SEOM to help promote body positivity by disseminating messages via SEOM that support body satisfaction and fuel more reasonable partner expectations. This may also be accomplished by media literacy interventions focusing on MSM-specific SEOM. Additional research assessing the feasibility and acceptability of these approaches as well as delving more deeply into these potential associations is warranted.

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