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The paradox of pornography – sexuality and problematic pornography use

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of sexual minority men who report self-perceived problematic pornography use is under theorised and not well understood despite controversial and conflicting research into the phenomena in heterosexual male populations. This study aimed to widen the conversation to consider the experience of sexuality in relation to self-perceived problematic pornography use, rather than contribute to literature that debates the definition and aetiology of problematic pornography use. Semi-structured online qualitative interviews were conducted with three sexual minority men who self-reported problematic pornography use. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to develop themes. Five themes pertinent to understanding the participants' experiences with problematic pornography use were developed: problematised sexuality, pornography as liberator, pornography as corrupter, reform, and relapse and restore. The themes highlight three men's relationship with their sexuality as a feature of their self-perceived problematic pornography use. The research suggests that idiographic experiences of self-perceived problematic pornography use are influenced and maintained by an incongruent and conflicting relationship between an individual's own experiences of sexuality and self-perceptions of pornography use. Limitations and future research recommendations are discussed.

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Introduction

Self-perceived problematic pornography use is gaining significant clinical and academic attention, particularly in relation to its prevalence, cause, correlates and effects on mental health and wellbeing (Binnie and Reavey 2020). The continuing growth of the Internet and its influence on the consumption of pornography has led to growing concerns about its 'addictive' nature (Willoughby 2019). Controversially, the majority of research into problematic pornography use aims to pathologise its aetiology, often attempting to align or misalign with traditional substance addiction models to best classify this phenomenon (Ley, Prause, and Finn 2014).

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However, relatively little research has focused on lived experiences of problematic pornography use to inform such debates, and even less attention has been given to sexual minority men and problematic pornography use. This is despite higher reported frequency of pornography use (Böthe et al. 2019) and an increased likelihood of developing negative mental health outcomes, compared to heterosexual men (Semlyen et al. 2016). Given the difficulties in reaching scholarly consensus, it is perhaps sensible to avoid rigid classification and consider problematic pornography use as a constellation of behaviours that can be typically/commonly attributed to people who self-perceive their relationship with pornography as problematic (Borgogna et al. 2020). This constellation can be grouped against four general themes: functional discord, self-perception of the problem defined by frequent use, difficulty controlling use, and emotional regulation (Kor et al. 2014).

Problematic pornography use amongst men has been highlighted by clinicians as an increasing concern perhaps due to its associations with negative mental and physical health outcomes (Harper and Hodgins 2016; Laier and Brand 2017). However, it is not clear that these outcomes are a direct result of pornography use or if use is a symptom or effect of wider issues (Griffiths 2012). For example, Cooper et al. (2001) found that men who perceive their relationship with pornography as problematic are more likely to have current or prior mental health issues and suicidal ideation. Other factors have also been explored to predict the distress related to self-perceived problematic pornography use including religiosity (Grubbs, Exline, et al. 2015; Volk et al. 2019), social norms concerning masculinity (Borgogna et al. 2020) and a history of traumatic experiences (Ybarra and Mitchell 2005). Taken together these findings widen the debate to a complex interplay between pornography use, self-perceptions and social expectations that may at varying degrees align, beyond frequency of use, to cause distress in those perceiving their relationship with pornography as problematic.

Pornography use is normalised amongst sexual minority men (Hooper et al. 2008; Morrison, Morrison, and Bradley 2007) with research demonstrating that gay and bisexual men use pornography more often than heterosexual men (Downing et al. 2017). Arguably this has been facilitated by the increase of accessibility through the Internet (Poole and Milligan 2018) and through higher levels of social acceptance of pornography within LGBTQ circles (Morrison, Morrison, and Bradley 2007). Despite this, only a small amount of research has specifically investigated sexual minority men's experiences with pornography (with an even smaller number specifically looking at problematic pornography use) and mental health outcomes. However, it has been recognised that pornography use itself, has advantages and disadvantages for gay and bisexual men (Rosser, Noor and Iantaffi 2014).

Attwood, Smith and Baker (2018) found that pornography was useful in enabling sexual minorities to learn about their own (and their communities') sexuality in absence of representation or sex positive examples in mainstream education or media. It has also been found that pornography offers sexual minorities a way to validate their sexuality and develop and secure their sexual identity (Böthe et al. 2019; Rothmann 2013). These findings suggest that pornography may act as a positive tool for sexual self-exploration and validation.

In contrast, studies that have looked exclusively at pornography use among sexual minority men have noted adverse effects between pornography, body image and

mental health (e.g. Whitfield et al. 2018; Settineri, Frisone and Marlo 2018) suggesting that gay/bi male pornography promotes idealised and unrealistic body images, leading to psychological distress. Whitfield et al. (2018) investigated pornography consumption and its association with mental health in sexual minority men and found that a greater consumption of pornography was directly related to increased negative body image, depression and anxiety. But beyond this and in contrast to heteronormative perspectives, sexual minority men's experiences with pornography and problematic pornography use are under-theorised and not fully understood (Bishop 2015; Böthe et al. 2019).

Current study

Research into problematic pornography use has identified inconsistencies in definition, classification and correlates. The majority of research into pornography, problematic pornography use and sexual minority men has utilised quantitative methodologies, most of these correlational, missing the opportunity to gain an understanding of sexual minority men's personal experiences. In contrast, this study adopted qualitative research methodologies as doing so provided an opportunity for deep exploration of experiences as the basis for making sense of the phenomena. The study specifically explored the feelings, thoughts and actions of sexual minority men with self-perceived problematic pornography use in order to develop a greater understanding of the research question, 'how do sexual minority men experience self-perceived problematic pornography use?'

Methodology

Design

A qualitative phenomenological design, using semi-structured interviews was adopted. Lived experiences describe the experiences and decisions of a person and the knowledge gained from these decisions and experiences (Chandler and Munday 2011). Phenomenological research does not take lived experiences as facts. Instead, it aims to understand the meaning of those experiences (Lindseth and Norberg 2004) and can provide rich and complex descriptions of the phenomena rather than offering causal analysis (Finlay 2013).

Recruitment and participants

To ensure a reasonable degree of consistency, the study required participants who identified as a gay/bisexual or questioning and who perceived their relationship with pornography to be problematic. Exclusion criteria were as follows: under 18 years of age, women, identify as heterosexual, use of pornography that is illegal and/or violent and extreme in nature.

Participants were recruited ($n=3$) using opportunity sampling through online advertisements posted on social community platforms on Reddit and Reboot Nation that exist to provide support and agency for those who feel they are addicted to pornography.

The three men who took part were: Joel, a 24-year-old bisexual man in North America; Edward, a 23-year-old bisexual man in South America; and Sanjay, a 36-year-old questioning man in Southeast Asia. The men resided in their countries of origin.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the ethics committee of the Division of Psychology at London Southbank University. Participants were given a brief detailing the research, a consent form, and were also informed that if at any time they felt overwhelmed or distressed, the interview could be stopped. Additionally, participants were provided with access to the interview schedule. Given the international locations of participants and the authors' residence in the UK, online interviewing was used to collect data (James and Busher 2006).

Data were collected through one per participant online semi structured 90-minute interview consisting of 10 open questions informed by the research question. Questions were sequenced so as to build rapport and explore participants' relationship, perspectives on, and attitudes towards pornography to gain insight into their understandings of perceived problems with pornography use. Follow up questions such as 'how did that feel?' and 'what were you thinking in that moment' allowed participants to expand upon what was being discussed. Probing and reflective questions like, 'I heard you say.... can you tell me more about that?' were used by the researcher to gain deeper understanding of the participants meaning making and experiences.

To provide additional information, participants completed two questionnaires: The Problematic Pornography Use Scale (Kor et al. 2014) and the Pornography History Questionnaire (Rosenberg and Kraus 2014). All participants reported using pornography and masturbating several times a day, and all had previously attempted to reduce or quit their use. Scores on the Problematic Pornography Use Scale were as follows: Joel 56, Edward 37, Sanjay 50. As normative data suggest a mean of approximately 5.6 (Kor et al. 2014), all participants could be said to experience a 'high' level of problematic pornography use.

Analytic procedure

Semi-structured interviews elicited rich information from participants in a focused and conversational way (Britten 1995). Interviews were recorded and verbatim transcripts were made to strengthen the credibility of the analysis and ensure referential adequacy (Byrne 2001). The transcripts were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Given that the phenomenon in question is complex, sensitive and poorly understood, IPA was deemed useful as it recognised and sought to understand lived experiences outside of any pre-defined theoretical model or preconception. Specifically, IPA encouraged an in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences of problematic pornography use; beliefs, emotions, behaviours and significance of the issue; and personal idiographic accounts of the experience (Smith and Shinebourne 2012).

IPA is an in-depth process, therefore small sample sizes are generally recommended, typically of between three to six participants (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Central to the process of IPA is hermeneutics, the interpretative element to IPA (Friesen, Henricksson and Saevi 2012). This occurred through the author interpretation of the participants' sense making, known as the 'double hermeneutic', which allowed us to develop a holistic representation of experiences. The analysis benefited both from the contribution from the participants (part) and the experience and knowledge of the authors (whole) (Tuffour 2017) to deliver an analytical interpretation. An iterative and inductive cycle of analysis was undertaken (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) to provide a holistic and interpretive account of participants' and authors' experiences.

Researcher reflexivity

The first author identifies as a gay man who is part of a gay community in London. His research interest comes from a curiosity about his own experiences of sexuality and pornography as well as the desire to advance research with LGBTQ communities. The second author identifies as heterosexual and was the supervisor of this study.

The authors reflected on their relationship with the research, noting how their experience may impact the interpretation of the data. In choosing IPA, we wanted to provide sexual minority men with a voice and question some of the broad generalisations made about sexual minority men and problematic pornography use in the existing literature.

Findings

The analysis led to the identification of five themes as shown in Figure 1 below.

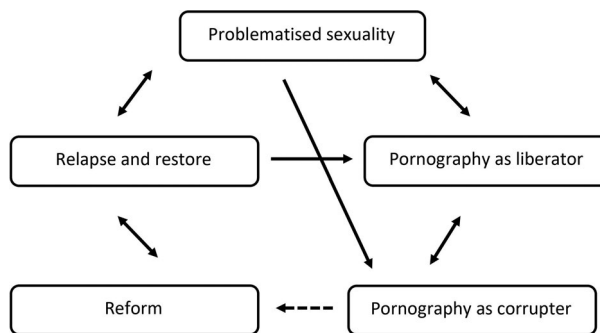


Figure 1. Superordinate themes and relationships.

Problematised sexuality

This theme illustrates how participants experienced sexuality as a tension between repression and expression of their experiences and relationships to sexual identity. As Joel, reflecting on his early experiences growing up in a conservative Christian family, said:

... if you choose to engage with sexuality in any capacity then you're wrong. You're sinning. You know, so that's been a major, big influence on how I perceived sexuality and how engaged with it. Especially coming from you know my father, who basically said don't have a girlfriend, you can't have sex, you dare to have sex, you're going to lose part of yourself if you do mentality. (Joel. L593-597)

There are several important features in this extract. First, there is a struggle between what Joel might dare to feel and or explore and what a conservative religious narrative deems as right and wrong. There is a sense of sexuality being a choice, as something separate and controllable, to be mastered for the right outcome with any deviation leading to mental instability ('lose part of yourself mentally' L, 594) and punishment ('sinning', L 594). The relationship between sexuality and conservative religious discourse creates a conflict that led Joel to perceive a wrongness in his sexuality. The use of the phrase, 'you know' throughout the excerpt signals Joel's need to seek reassurance from the author, as if their experiences with religious fathers are shared and understandable to 'men like us'.

For Edward, not religious but social narratives influenced his relationship with sexuality.

... I was bullied because of my sexual orientation...erm...I had to change school... obviously I wasn't openly gay or bisexual to anyone because I wasn't able to accept that then... Coming out was problematic, my father never spoke of it. (Edward. L298-328)

The extract above illustrates the consequences of being socially different. Edwards was targeted, socially rejected and ostracised for appearing different. Despite not being 'out', he somehow did not 'fit' with the rest of the group. There is a sense of alienation and 'otherness' in his account which is compounded by rejection by his father. Reference to a set of social rules within this extract ('obviously I wasn't', L 315) dominated Edwards experience of sexuality. He shows an understanding of what is socially acceptable or not, as if there are set rules about when and how to 'come out'. However, unlike Joel, Edward appears more flexible in his appraisal of sexuality. He states he was not able to accept that he was gay/bisexual at a point in time, inferring a problem he would need resolve in the future.

In contrast to Edward, Sanjay described how his sexuality was unwanted, unacceptable and painful. He said:

I have never really wanted a relationship with the same sex. For me it is something which comes from a place of trauma... whenever I am speaking with someone or a person (man), I think, that kind of comes up... those intrusive thoughts (same sex) that were very painful. (Sanjay. L141-146)

This extract demonstrates how an unwanted early traumatic sexual experience with another man has problematised Sanjay's relationship with sexuality. He links a painful past with his desires for the same sex, associating those desires with pain and vulnerability. Sanjay's use of the words 'someone or a person' can be interpreted as a way of distancing himself and hiding his sexual desire. The deliberate omission, however, inferred use of the word 'man' creates a sense of shame and judgement, something he cannot talk about. His defiance at the beginning of the extract represents an attempt to delegitimise his feelings. There is a duality in

the relationship between a desire and a self-judgement for the desire that creates conflict and self-criticism. Importantly, Sanjay's experience differs from Joel and Edward's in that the force that influenced and problematised his relationship to his sexuality was a physical interaction with an individual and not a set of social or religious forces.

Pornography as liberator

Given the influence of external forces on men's relationship with sexuality, it is not surprising that participants' use of pornography allowed for an expression of their relationship to sexuality. For men in this study, using pornography became way of normalising hitherto 'forbidden' sexual desire and regulating the discomfort they felt with sexuality. For Edward, pornography offered a means of relief.

that led me to... release those urges with porn because I wasn't getting laid. (laughs)...I wasn't over there talking to girls or guys so yeah... I wasn't able to have sex, so that was the second-best option. (Edward. L431-436)

Here, pornography provides an alternative means of sexual expression and fulfilment. Edward's reflections were spoken about with a degree of humour; he was making light of his perceived sense of social and sexual inadequacy. The phrase 'over there' shows a separation between himself and others. As an outsider, pornography allows him to engage in his sexuality without feeling inadequate and rejected. Sanjay, on the other hand, used pornography to escape and manage his negative feelings.

it (porn use) was my number one mood stabiliser, I always used to think that it was my grounding, no matter how, what emotional state, once I get to that emotional state I know where I am. (Sanjay. L319-321)

The phrase 'mood stabiliser' implies that pornography has psychopharmacological qualities that create calm amongst chaos. In this regard pornography grounds him, there is a sense of irony here that something so fantastical is also grounding. This is further compounded by the use of the phrase 'I know where I am' which carries feelings of familiarity, certainty and security. Sanjay's use of pornography provides him with a place free from threat and vulnerability.

In contrast, Joel used pornography to gain understanding, and to detach himself from his problematised sexuality.

That was a process of discovery and process of learning about sexuality, not the right way, but, but it was... seeing men engage in sexual acts and being happy about it... enjoying it and be comfortable with each other, like that was really good for me to see. (Joel. L412-415)

Here, pornography use was a process of sexual education and discovery; however, there is still a sense of judgement, with the problematised sexuality still holding some power about there being a right and a wrong way to learn about and discover sexuality. The repetition of word 'but' sounds remorseful yet definitive, almost as if he must accept defeat by the moral judgements about sexuality he has experienced. Pornography has allowed him to safely experience his sexual identity. The participants

responses feel familiar to the first author and he reflects on his experiences of pornography use to discover and educate himself as a gay adolescent.

Pornography as a corrupter

This theme depicts how pornography use becomes a heuristic experience for the undesirable, conferring with the 'discomfort' of the problematic relationship with sexuality. Participants self-appraisals and in turn self-judgements about the effects of their pornography use legitimises their sense of the problem. In this sense pornography is a corrupter for the already corrupted, despite it offering brief reprieve and liberation. As Joel explained,

I definitely saw myself going towards more extreme ends of the pornographic scale... one of the main reasons I was like, okay, this is a big problem... and then it (the desire) was manifested itself outside of porn too. I felt bad about it (sigh), I still feel bad about it, and I felt ashamed. I felt scared of why I was progressing towards that direction... in no way in reality do I desire those things. (Joel. L141-159)

Men's moral judgements about pornographic content created an opportunity to reflect on what they understood as right and wrong sexual desires, and worrying about the danger of having wrong sexual thoughts. This was echoed by Joel's use of the word 'scale' almost as if there as is there are acceptable and unacceptable fantasies and scoring highly on a scale denotes problems for himself and others. There is also a sense of danger here. Joel blurs fantasy with real life such that his desires become fearful, shaming and harmful. Joel's 'sigh' relays the weight of his perceived wrongdoing and indicates his almost battle-weary relationship with the corruption he see as deriving from pornography.

Sanjay described how using pornography had affected his physical and mental health, when he said:

I've lost so much of my... my health, my health also starts getting affected right after (using porn), people can see it, actually, I have had friends who have had sincere concerns if I was ill or needed to see a doctor or take care of myself... I would feel overwhelmed, it's like you are in a very stressful relationship with part of yourself. (Sanjay. L60-71)

Here, pornography is seen as having the power to cause visible illness and mental distress. Sanjay believed his pornography use affected his health and alerted others to his wrongdoing. The phrase, '...actually, I have friends who have had sincere concerns' reveals how alarmed he was about his pornography use. Sanjay describes having a 'stressful relationship with part of' himself and implies he wants to separate himself from the part that has been corrupted. It is this part of himself that has negative consequences (i.e. makes him unwell, stressed and wrong). In a similar way, Edward said:

... one and most problematic [thing], and it's the one that made me suffer the most, is that having ... I mean it's almost impossible for me to have an erection without watching porn or consuming Viagra... that's the thing that led me to realise that I had a problem. (Edward. L118-121)

There is a self-perceived cause and effect relationship here between pornography use and erectile dysfunction, creating a loss of confidence and suffering. The key

illustration of this in the extract is Edward's linking together pornography and Viagra. Both serve contribute to his sexual performance and yet he problematises pornography for causing trouble in real life. His relationship with pornography is complex. There is a sense that social norms and ideals about performance and masculinity are central to Edwards's perspective on sexuality. He is guided by a set of expectations that he should be always fulfilling. He should be hard; he should be a good sexual performer and any deviation from that narrative is wrong and problematic

Reform

In each participant's account, there is a relationship between problematised sexuality, pornography as liberator, and pornography as corrupter. This leads participants to question their pornography use which instigates change to remove the discomfort that the use of pornography brings. Participants feel pornography needs to be controlled in order to restore a sense of normalcy. This theme illustrates participants attempts to reform their behaviours using addiction labelling and language. As Sanjay explained:

Right now, it's just on the abstinent side... I've not watched it for two months and 11 days now... I can see it as, an, like a...er...a foe...yeah. (Sanjay. L29-36)

For Sanjay, being 'on the abstinent side' provides him with a sense of protection from threat. He uses the word, 'foe' to describe how pornography engaged with him. To him there are clear sides, friend and foe. Being on the right side allows Sanjay to lose the sense of powerlessness and discomfort that pornography causes. Abstinence allows for a sense of agency within himself and with the world. Broadly, the use of language perpetuates the idea that pornography use is wrong, and Sanjay demonises the object (pornography) in order to make it more manageable.

Similarly, Joel removed the discomfort that pornography use brings by making his problematised pornography use a key focus in his life, he said:

I have to put it centre stage in my life in terms of solving the problem so...umm... putting it as the most top priority item in my life that I didn't take care of, is part of how I'm dealing with it ... because I was treating it as this tertiary thing and I needed to, you know... But part of it is actually recognising that this, this needs to be centre, and so you know one of the coping things is going about engaging with reboot nation. (Joel. L87-93)

This extract typifies the need to recognise a problem as the first part of recovery. Specifically, the language Joel uses denotes something that needs serious attention and mental effort to resolve. The term 'centre stage' denotes something that needs illuminating and show for all to see. The centrality of Joel's problem-solving efforts is deliberately consuming and a coping strategy in of itself. There is a seriousness and certainty for Joel that this problem needs resolution and that he can overcome it. Joel appears to strive towards self-mastery and control. Ironically, this focus is as consuming as his relationship to pornography. The engagement with Reboot Nation¹, like Sanjay, confirms and legitimises the seriousness of the self-perceived problem.

In contrast, Edward refrains from the use of addiction language and perceives his problems as having less intensity when he said:

I don't feel that I am addicted, I mean I don't stop hanging out with friends, or working or studying for needing to watch porn. I think that's where the erm...yeah...that's where it differs from the real addiction... So basically, if I was with someone who would have sex with me when I had those urges that would be easier... so you could say I have a high sex drive. (Edward. L235-37, 289-290)

There is an assessment here between what is perceived as an addiction and what would more suitably solve the problem. There is a sense of proportionality and ease in solving a complex problem but not an addiction. The phrase 'so basically' is a way of minimising the consequences of his perceived problematic pornography use and distancing himself from addiction narratives, opting instead for a high sex drive narrative. For Edward, a coping strategy in this context would be a real-life relationship that would bring about balance. In this case pornography is less problematic and central to Edward.

Relapse and restore

Participants failure to adhere to the coping strategies they identified relating to pornography use and the negative affect they subsequently experienced in turn motivates pornography use (pornography as liberator). But after the event, pornography use translates into regret and shame. Joel explained:

Like after my initial reaction (ejaculation after porn use), it follows with deep sadness like I'm never going to break free... Like that you know that feeling of sadness and anger like those are also my triggers for going back... right... and so it cycles me back in. (Joel. L369-376)

There is a consciousness to the cycle in this extract, and a feeling of being stuck in a loop of helpful and unhelpful perceptions. Joel displays a sense of hopelessness, typified by the phrase, 'I'm never going to break free'. There is a sense of expectancy and burden despite efforts to control and minimise the threat that pornography use poses. Such a perspective was also shared by Sanjay who said:

I used to abstain for periods of time...but then one day it used to be like just ok something on YouTube...because I am human and that's going to release some hormones and chemicals that's going to stabilise things in my body, which is something I used to tell myself, so... I'd indulge myself for 30 mins on one day and then I'd be like that that was it I'm not perusing this anymore. (Sanjay. L42-46)

For Sanjay, pornography was reliable in restoring balance and satisfying his need for physical relief. But at the same time it was seen as indulgent and dangerous. The phrase 'because I am human' provides Sanjay with permission to masturbate while the phrase 'stabilise things in my body' points to an imbalance that needs to be redressed.

Edward was much less judgemental about breaking his own abstinence rules he says:

If I actually quit porn my problem or my arousal or erection will go to normal, everything would work as it should be... the problem is the porn excites me more than my sexual partner and it's not because I find people in porn more attractive or desirable but it's the fact of watching two other people having intercourse that gets me going...so (laughs). (Edward. L425-426, 450-453)

This extract highlights how abstinence, for Edward, is a limited strategy as it suppresses his voyeuristic desires. Here the paradox is that pornography is more exciting than his real-life experiences, so abstinence acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy and likely to fail despite his ambitions. Edwards' 'laugh' provides a sense of playfulness to his experiences of pornography use; however he appears to be embarrassed or apologetic for the revealing the truth of his desire.

Discussion

The results of this study, organised around five themes, illustrate the lived experiences of three sexual minority men who self-perceive themselves as having a problematic relationship with pornography use. Each of these themes is discussed in further detail below.

Problematised sexuality

Broadly speaking, existing research suggests that the moral and social stigmatisation of same sex attraction and same sex practices contributes to a dissonance between sexual desire and expectations, significantly affecting evaluations of sexual experience and, in turn, mental health. (Almeida et al. 2009; Szymanski and Chung 2003; Verduzco 2016). Additionally, prior sexual trauma has also been demonstrated to stigmatise sexuality for the victim and lead to increased risk of mental health difficulties and sexual functioning (Ybarra and Mitchell 2005).

All the participants in this study experienced stigmatisation (and in turn trauma) from others to create a dissonance between desire and expectations, irrespective of context. Although, the locus of those forces differed between settings – for example, Joel experienced the force of religious conservatism in North America, Edward experienced the power of social norms in a South American country, and Sanjay experienced force as a victim of sexual abuse in Asia – in each case participants experienced a degree of trauma affecting their relationship to their own sexuality. This in turn caused critical self-judgement about their sexuality to become a central feature when reflecting on their experience of problematic pornography use.

Porn as liberator, porn as corrupter

All participants experienced pornography use as both liberating and corrupting, mirroring the contrasting stances in the literature concerning the advantages and disadvantages of pornography use by members of LGBT communities (e.g. Böthe et al. 2019; Poole and Milligan 2018; Whitfield et al. 2018). Participants' judgements about the frequency of pornography use led, to varying degrees of intensity, to a

pathologisation of this use. Both Joel and Sanjay appraised the amount of pornography they used to determine their 'sickness' while Edward attributed frequent use to his lack of ability to perform sexually.

Grubbs, Exline, et al. (2015) found that religiosity and moral disapproval of pornography use predicted self-perceived problematic pornography use, irrespective of patterns of actual use, amongst heterosexual users. This suggests that these self-perceptions arise from moral judgement and not from actual patterns of behaviour (Grubbs and Perry 2019). These findings may also be relevant to the sexual minority men in this study given the role the effects that a problematised sexuality had on their experiences of problematic pornography use.

However, despite perceiving frequency as a marker for abnormal pornography use, participants in this study used pornography to manage negative emotions. Joel used it to manage the tension between repression and desire, Edward used pornography to reduce stress and anxiety, and Sanjay used to escape feelings of isolation and shame. In their research, Laier and Brand (2017) found that consuming pornography provided immediate gratification which elevated and stabilised mood. However, they suggest that through repeated positive reinforcement, the relationship with pornography changes to one of reliance whereby pornography comes to compensate for low or anxious mood.

Given the advantages and disadvantages of a dependent relationship on pornography (Rosser, Noor and Iantaffi 2014), and the influence of a problematised sexuality (Kwee, Dominguez and Ferrell 2007) participants in this study found it hard to identify what might be 'normal' pornography use. For them, self-perceptions along with a priori judgements about when and how they used pornography validated their sense of having a problematic relationship with pornography.

Reform, relapse and restore

Joel and Sanjay placed a stress on addiction labelling. Edward rejected ideas about addiction, despite a pathologisation of his pornography use. However, he did not pathologise his relationship with pornography with the intensity of Joel and Sanjay, and consequently did not report to being so consumed by its negative effects.

Grubbs, Stauner, et al. (2015) demonstrated that self-perceptions of pornography addiction, in and of itself, can create psychological problems. They assessed perceptions of addiction and frequency of use amongst a large cross sectional sample of adults who perceived their pornography use was problematic. They found that daily pornography use only weakly correlated with the expression of anger, however self-perceptions of addiction were strongly associated with psychological distress. This suggests that pornography use has no consistent relationship with emotional state in the way that perceiving an addiction does. Grubbs, Stauner et al.'s findings mirror the experiences of participants in this and other research (e.g. Harper and Hodgins 2016) where the more participants perceived their problems as addiction, the more their experiences were distressing and the notion of addiction was legitimised.

This raises questions about the efficacy of management strategies. The commonly adopted coping strategy for self-perceived problematic pornography use is abstinence (Efrati and Gola 2018; Fernandez, Kuss, and Griffiths 2020). All participants in this

study had attempted to abstain from pornography to control their pornography use, some more intensely than others. Joel and Sanjay adopted strict rules to prevent themselves from using pornography, whereas Edward felt pornography was something he could manage over time and would be less problematic for him when he found a regular relationship. Perhaps the limitations of abstinence can be highlighted by participants' experiences of relapse (Grant et al. 2010). Arguably, if participants' experiences of problematised relationship with pornography are influenced by self-perceptions and a priori beliefs about why they use, then abstinence alone will prove to be a limited strategy for change.

Sniewski and Farvid (2019) found that self-acceptance and acceptance of pornography use served as a more beneficial strategy for self-perceived problematic use than abstinence alone, findings that appear to align with Edward's experiences. However, given the limited amount of research on self-management strategies for problematic pornography use, further research is needed. Participants in this study experienced abstinence and then relapse, creating significant psychological distress which in turn led to further use of pornography.

Limitations and future developments

Whilst IPA proved to be an appropriate methodological approach to use in this research, there are limitations.

Whilst sampling was theoretically consistent with qualitative approaches, specifically with IPA, the topic along with the sampling approach could have restricted the opportunity for a larger sample size. Given the small sample size it would be unwise to assume that the findings of this research are generalisable to sexual minority men who self-perceive their relationship with pornography as problematic. However, the three participant experiences do offer the potential for further enquiry, particularly where there has been, historically, little attention paid to the role of sexuality and problematic pornography use.

Some have also argued that IPA is limited in application, by promoting lived experience over theoretical and methodological grounding (Giorgi 2011; Sousa 2008). Although the research followed the well-established methodology for IPA (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) there is always, despite best efforts, room for the researcher to assess the participants experiences through their own interpretations. Therefore, it is possible that different researchers could highlight different themes from the same data. However, IPA, and indeed this research, did not aim to make generalisations or provide objective answers to complex questions (Morrow and Smith 2000). Instead, the aim was to illuminate the nuances of subjective human experiences, often lost in quantitative research.

Further research into sexual minority men and problematic pornography use could further explore the role of sexuality and problematic pornography use more deeply. Despite the current limitations, this study does draw attention, albeit limited, to wider experiences that amount to participants experience of problematic pornography use. Specifically, further qualitative research, adopting a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), would be useful to explore and conceptualise the role of problematised sexuality in problematic pornography use from a larger sample. This

would enable further quantitative designs to test the strength of those theoretical assumptions.

Conclusion

This study found that three sexual minority men experienced their self-perceived problematic pornography use in complex ways. Pornography use proved beneficial for negotiating and affirming their sexuality when external forces sought to deny other forms of expression. On the other hand, pathologised pornography use proved harmful to their self-perceptions and expectations of sexual normalcy. Participants' perceptions of pornography use mirrored the traumatic experiences of their own relationship with sexuality. It is possible that their self-perceived problematic pornography use is part of that traumatic relationship with sexuality.

Note

1. An Internet forum for people with pornography addiction where participants support each other and share stories and resources on how to become free from pornography addiction.

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