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RESEARCH

Unusual online sexual interests in heterosexual Swedish and Italian university students



F. Tripodi^{a,*}, S. Eleuteri^{b,**}, M. Giuliani^c, R. Rossi^a, S. Livi^b,
I. Petruccelli^d, F. Petruccelli^e, K. Daneback^f, C. Simonelli^b

^a Institute of Clinical Sexology, via Savoia 78, 00198 Rome, Italy

^b Sapienza University of Rome, via di Grottarossa, 1035, 00189 Rome, Italy

^c Italian Society of Sexology and Psychology, Rome, Italy

^d "Kore", University of Enna, Enna, Italy

^e University of Cassino and Southern Lazio, Cassino, Italy

^f University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

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Summary Previous studies explain that the Internet makes it possible to explore various unusual desires with little embarrassment and often with the illusion of personal security. Despite the flourishing publications on the double link between sexuality and the Internet in the last decade, there are relatively few studies analyzing the contents of online erotic stimuli to specifically investigate unusual sexual interests.

Objective of the study. – To examine cultural and gender differences in online sexual behaviors and unusual sexual interests in online pornography reported by young adults recruited in Italy and Sweden, aiming to offer clinical considerations that could be useful when facing this issue in clinical practice.

Method. – A survey was conducted with 847 Italian and Swedish heterosexual university students. They completed a set of measures including Internet Sex Screening Test, Sexual Addiction Screening Test – Abbreviated and Unusual Online Sexual Interests Questionnaire.

Results. – Men scored higher than women did on viewing and feeling excited by unusual sexual interests. Although the conditional effect of gender was statistically significant ($P < 0.05$) in both national contexts for the same scenes, the differences between males and females were greater in Italy than in Sweden. Swedish women appeared more curious about sexual contents than Italian ones, with no differences regarding excitement level.

Discussion and conclusion. – Our results could help clinicians by offering information about the diffusion of some unusual online sexual interests and the "normality" of the Internet use for sexual purposes. It is very important that the clinicians have a specific knowledge on online

* Corresponding author.

** Co-corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: francitrip@hotmail.com (F. Tripodi), stefano.eleuteri@uniroma1.it (S. Eleuteri).

sexual matters; otherwise, they could be vulnerable to stereotyping and making judgments. The contents of the seen pornographic scenes and the felt excitement could be important topics to focus in the psychosexual counselling. They could be considered, in fact, as possible indicators of sexual compulsivity and/or cybersexual problematic behavior.

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Introduction

The Internet has become an important and readily available medium in exploring one's sexuality (Galbreath et al., 2002) and a wide arena where individuals can have many opportunities to extend their knowledge of sexual behaviors and to look at unusual sexual interests (Albright, 2008; Ross, 2005). This has to be particularly taken into account in contemporary Western societies, where advances in technology have made pornography easily accessible, thus facilitating its consumption (Daneback et al., 2009). The Internet makes it possible to explore various unusual desires with little embarrassment and often with the illusion of personal security (Galbreath et al., 2002). Unusual sexual interests refer to particular curiosities and/or fantasies for sexual behaviors that are not part of the statistical norm as to what people tend to "do" or to "prefer" sexually. What constitutes an unusual sexual fantasy is not clear (Joyal et al., 2014). They are normally intriguing to many people (Kar and Koola, 2007; Scorolli et al., 2007), although clinicians are also called on to intervene in such topics. The pornographic material found online may have a normalizing and validating effect on sexual ideation (Berger et al., 2005), facilitating unusual sexual preferences among those with a pre-existing predilection for such erotic fantasies (Galbreath et al., 2002) and, presumably, leading some subjects to the discovery of new interests.

Despite the flourishing publications on the double link between sexuality and the Internet in the last decade (Daneback and Ross, 2011), there are relatively few studies analyzing the contents of online erotic stimuli to specifically investigate unusual sexual interests. In 2001, Mehta published an article based on a research carried out in 1995 and 1996, where 9800 pornographic images taken from 32 Usenet newsgroups were analyzed (Mehta, 2001). According to Canada's criminal codes, it was found that a vast majority of the pictures contained legally permissible depictions of sexual acts, while a very small percentage of images could be classified as "obscene" as paedophilia, bestiality, coprophilia/urophilia, amputation and mutilation, and necrophilia.

In 2007, Scorolli et al. conducted a study to survey unusual sexual preferences on the Internet by analyzing the English-language section of the Yahoo! Groups (Scorolli et al., 2007). They devised three macroareas: body, objects and behaviors, and each group was assigned to one or more categories based on its features and/or sexual contents of the discussions. The study demonstrated that most sexual preferences are directly related to the human body (e.g. feet) or to objects experienced in close association with the body (e.g., clothing). Preferences for objects not closely

associated with the body, one's own usual sexual behaviors and events that do not involve persons were instead rare. More recently, Romito and Beltrami described the content of pornography watched by young Italian students, aged 18–25, analyzing the link between having experienced psychological and physical family violence and/or sexual violence and pornography use (Romito and Beltrami, 2011). The results indicated that male students were 5 times more likely to watch pornography than female ones; they started earlier and more frequently on their own initiative, found pornography more sexually exciting, and reacted less often with fear or disgust. In particular, 42% of males and 32% of females watched violence against women, including extreme degradation, rape, torture, and murder; 33% of males and 26% of females watched depictions of women seeming to enjoy the violence inflicted on them. In addition, a significant minority watched pornography containing sex with animals, sadomasochism, and women torturing men. Excitement proved for these scenes was not investigated.

Although some of these studies investigated a large variety of pornographic material, to the best of our knowledge, no researches were focused on unusual sexual interests nor on the role of cultural aspects in influencing them. More specifically, no studies provided correlations between the viewing of such pornographic scenes and problematic online sexual behaviors.

This study

Our study involved a large, selected population of young Italian and Swedish adults. It was decided to make a comparison between Italy and Sweden because, despite both being Western countries, they have a lot of cultural differences, particularly in openness regarding sexual matters. Sweden is often cited as a country more accepting of sexuality in general, as well as of newer and non-traditional sexual variations and practices (Tikkanen and Ross, 2003). The Swedish population is also reported to have a higher degree of "sexual literacy" than most others, and Swedes was the first country in the world to incorporate compulsory sexual education (Lottes, 2002). The aforementioned factors, along with a societal liberation and openness on sexual matters beginning at the end of the 1950s, may all contribute to the Swedish people, particularly the women, being more comfortable with online sexuality than other populations (Cooper et al., 2003). On the other hand, in Italy, the historical coexistence of a strong Catholic culture and a "tolerant" Mediterranean one (Lingiardi et al., 2005) has reinforced the diffusion of a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude, represented by a closed and conservative ideology, especially regarding sexual topics. To give some examples,

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