



Internet pornography and relationship quality: A longitudinal study of within and between partner effects of adjustment, sexual satisfaction and sexually explicit internet material among newly-weds



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ABSTRACT

Several studies have established a negative relation between the use of sexually explicit Internet material (SEIM) and relationship quality. While most studies imply SEIM use decreases relationship quality, the opposite might also be true: lower relationship quality might increase people's SEIM use. This article aims to shed light on the directionality of the relation between SEIM use and relationship quality among married couples. We used prospective dyadic data to examine the short- and long-term relation between SEIM use, sexual satisfaction, and relationship adjustment among adult SEIM users and their partners. The results showed that, among husbands, adjustment and SEIM use are negatively and reciprocally related. Also, sexual satisfaction among husbands predicted a decrease in their wives' SEIM one year later, while wives' SEIM did not affect their husbands' sexual satisfaction. The findings have important implications for theories on the link between relationship quality and SEIM use.

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1. Introduction

Sexually explicit material (SEM), material which depicts sexual activity in obvious and un concealed ways (Kelley, Dawson, & Musialowski, 1989), is easily and seemingly anonymously available on the Internet (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; Freeman-Longo, 2000). Sex-related words are at the top of search terms used in search engines (Cooper et al., 1999; Freeman-Longo, 2000; Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2001). There are clear indications that people in committed relationships regularly consume sexually explicit Internet materials (SEIM) (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). SEIM use has often been found to be negatively (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Clark & Wiederman, 2000; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010) and sometimes positively (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011) associated with relationship quality. However, only a few studies can weigh in on the directionality of the relation between relationship quality and SEIM use (Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). In this study, we aim to shed more light

on the directionality of the relation between relationship quality and SEIM use among married couples, and use prospective dyadic data to examine the short- and long-term positive and negative effects on both SEIM users and their partners.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. SEIM use and relationship quality

SEIM use plays a considerable role in many committed relationships (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). For example, in a sample of heterosexual couples, 72% of the men and 56% of the women reported SEM use (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Because of its prevalence, the question rises which role SEIM use plays in adult relationships.

One of the most widely used constructs to denote relationship quality is relationship adjustment, which consists of relationship satisfaction, consensus, cohesion and expression of affection (Spanier, 1976). Another important component of relationship quality in romantic relationships, which has been linked to relationship quality, is sexual satisfaction (Bradbury & Karney, 2010). Given the sexual content of SEIM, it is important to examine both relationship quality and sexual satisfaction. Not surprisingly therefore, most studies that examine SEIM and relationship quality examine both relationship adjustment and sexual satisfaction

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(Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Maddox, Rhoades, & Markman, 2011; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010).

While most correlational studies among couples have shown that for both men and women, SEM is related to lower relationship quality and sexual satisfaction (Maddox et al., 2011; Short, Black, Smith, Wetterneck, & Wells, 2012; Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010), others found negative associations between SEM and relationship quality for men but not for women (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Furthermore, cross-sectional studies among couples show cross-partner associations between SEM, relationship quality and sexual satisfaction. Women's SEM use relates positively to her male partner's relationship quality and sexual satisfaction (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011), whereas men's SEM use and their female partner's relationship quality and sexual satisfaction are negatively associated (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012). These differences might be explained by a difference for men and women in their primary reason for SEM use: for men it is to create arousal for masturbation purposes, for women this is as a part of lovemaking (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Other studies have confirmed that the solo use of SEM has a negative association with relationship quality and sexual satisfaction (Daneback, Traeen, & Månsson, 2009; Maddox et al., 2011; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010), while some studies find no (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010) or a positive (Maddox et al., 2011) association between SEM use as a couple. However, all of these studies are cross-sectional, and thus cannot make claims about the direction of these effects.

1.1.2. Directionality

To our knowledge, only one published study assessed the directionality of the relation between relationship quality and SEIM use. A three-wave survey study among adolescents (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009) showed that exposure to SEIM reduced adolescents' sexual satisfaction. Conversely, lower sexual satisfaction also increased the use of SEIM over time. The results did not differ among male and female adolescents. While this study shows a reciprocal relation between SEIM use and sexual satisfaction among adolescents, the question remains what the role of SEIM is in ongoing, long-lasting adult relationships and how SEIM use affects relationship partners.

Theoretically, there are several mechanisms through which SEIM might affect relationship quality and sexual satisfaction. A commonly used argument is that such materials cause people to contrast their sexual experiences and partners's attractiveness with their SEIM experiences (Albright, 2008; Kenrick, Gutierrez, & Goldberg, 1989; Olmstead et al., 2013). It is also possible that SEIM serves as an attractive alternative to sexual activities in the relationship, which, according to the Investment Model, might decrease satisfaction and commitment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Indeed, an experimental study showed that participants who refrained from SEM reported higher levels of commitment than those who continued using it (Lambert et al., 2012). From a communication perspective, SEIM use may give partners (especially women) the impression that one is not satisfied with the (sexual) relationship (Clark & Wiederman, 2000) and is related to lower self-esteem in women (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012), which mediates the negative effect on relationship quality (Stewart & Szymanski, 2012). Thus, theoretically SEIM use may negatively affect relationship quality and sexual satisfaction through contrast effects which may favor SEIM above real life experiences, through lowering commitment by making sexual alternatives available, and by communicating relational or sexual dissatisfaction to relationship partners.

Theoretically, there are also good reasons to expect that relationship quality and/or sexual satisfaction affect SEIM use. It has been well documented that people select media that satisfy

specific needs, in this case the need for a satisfactory sex life. Partners may increase their use of SEIM to compensate for or "spice up" a dull sex life (Olmstead et al., 2013). Another plausible mechanism is that people might use SEIM as a mood elevator to manage negative feelings caused by an unhappy relationship (Zillmann, 1988). Furthermore, people in unhappy relationships may seek to engage in escapism: 'Escaping' the reality of their situation by using SEIM (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010). Thus, actively seeking out sexual media for reasons of mood management or compensation may serve as mechanisms that lead to the reverse causal mechanism in the relation between SEIM use and sexual or relationship satisfaction.

Both directions have been shown to occur in adolescents (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009), and there are plausible reasons for both directions in romantic couples. However, so far no direct test of the relationship between SEIM use and relationship quality and sexual satisfaction has been conducted, and no study used prospective dyadic data to examine the possible short- and long-term relation between these variables.

1.2. The present study

As described above, only a few studies can speak to the directionality of the relation between relationship quality and SEIM use (Lambert et al., 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009), of which only one investigates long-term effects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). Because long-term effects have only been studied in adolescents, and it is unknown if short-term effects on adult relationships translate into long-term effects, this study aims to shed light on the long-term directionality of the link between SEIM use and relationship quality within and across partners, and uses prospective dyadic data to examine the short- and long-term positive and negative effects on both SEIM users and their partners.

We expected to replicate cross-sectional findings for husbands and wives (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Daneback et al., 2009; Maddox et al., 2011; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010), and, because both directionalities are theoretically possible, extend these findings by exploring the long-term effects of SEIM and relationship quality among newlywed couples. In the early years of marriage, couples establish relationship habits and rules that are for a large part predictive of later relational characteristics (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). Therefore newlyweds are an ideal group to examine relationship effects. They allow us to investigate change and relationship development, that are representative of the relationship in later years.

Gender plays an important role in all research about SEM, for example, because it has been shown that men and women differ in their primary reason for SEM use (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Therefore we formulate different hypotheses for husbands and wives. Specifically, we advanced the following hypotheses and research question: Because most correlational studies among couples have shown that for men, SEM is related to lower relationship quality and sexual satisfaction (Maddox et al., 2011; Short et al., 2012; Stack et al., 2004; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010), we hypothesize that greater SEIM use is associated with lower adjustment and sexual satisfaction among husbands (H1). However, because a correlational study among couples showed a negative association between SEM and relationship quality for men but not for women (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011), we hypothesize that greater SEIM use is not associated with adjustment and sexual satisfaction among wives (H2).

Furthermore, cross-sectional studies among couples show cross-partner associations between SEM, relationship quality, and sexual satisfaction. Among couples, men's SEM use and their female partner's relationship quality and sexual satisfaction are negatively associated (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Stewart &

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