



# Online sexual activity in Mainland China: Relationship to sexual sensation seeking and sociosexuality



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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined online sexual activity (OSA) in Mainland China. Specifically, characteristics of OSA and its relation with sexual sensation seeking and sociosexuality were investigated. OSAs were categorized as viewing sexually-explicit material (SEM), sexual partner seeking, cybersex, and flirting. Participants ( $N = 460$ ) completed measures of OSA experience within the past 12 months, sexual sensation seeking, and sociosexuality. The majority of participants reported OSA experiences in the past 12 months. However, more men reported engaging in all subtypes of OSA experience than women, and men reported a higher frequency of SEM and flirting than women. Income and sexual experience were also related to frequency of OSA. In addition, sexual sensation seeking, sociosexual behavior and desire, but not sociosexual attitude, significantly predicted OSA. Moreover, sexual sensation seeking, sociosexual behavior, and sociosexual desire fully mediated the relationship between gender and OSA. The results indicated that variables related to offline sexual behavior are also related to OSA, and may account for gender differences in OSA experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

With growing numbers of Internet users, many people are using the Internet for online sexual activities (OSA). OSA refers to any sexual activity online, including looking for a partner; shopping for sexual products; erotic chatting; viewing erotic or pornographic pictures and movies; seeking sexual support; having cybersex; and seeking real life partners to have sexual relations (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002).

The study of OSA is broad and encompasses a variety of activities. Researchers have focused on various aspects of OSA. For example, Shaughnessy, Byers, and Walsh (2011) examined OSA in three categories: non-arousal activities (e.g., seeking sexual information); solitary-arousal activities (e.g., viewing sexually explicit videos); and partnered-arousal activities (e.g., maintaining a sex partner online). Other researchers have focused on cybersex, which is defined two or more people engaging in online sexual talk for the purpose of sexual pleasure; this may include masturbation (Daneback, Cooper, & Månsson, 2005; Goldberg, Peterson, Rosen, & Sara, 2008; Landau, Garrett, & Webb, 2008; Remington & Gast,

2007; Shaughnessy & Byers, 2013; Shaughnessy, Byers, & Thornton, 2011).

Studies have indicated that both men and women engage in OSA. However, there are gender differences in several aspects of OSA. For instance, studies indicate that men use the Internet to view sexually explicit material (SEM) significantly more than do women (Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002; Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2001; Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011; Velezmoro, Negy, & Livia, 2012). Furthermore, research has also demonstrated that men engage in more partnered-arousal OSA (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011) and cybersex (Daneback et al., 2005) than do women. On the other hand, women use the Internet more often to stay in contact with a lover or sexual partner that they already have (i.e., not a new partner that they met via the Internet) than men do (Cooper, Månsson, Daneback, Tikkanen, & Ross, 2003). Moreover, women report a higher percentage of Internet use for purposes of seeking support or education for sexual matters (Cooper et al., 2003). Importantly, there appears to be no significant differences between men and women in their use of the Internet to find sexual partners or to seek sex-related information (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011; Velezmoro et al., 2012). Gender differences of OSA is the important characters of OSA and majority of studies have explored it (e.g. Cooper et al., 2002; Goodson et al., 2001; Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011; Velezmoro et al., 2012).

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However, almost all reports were based on Western participants. Thus, the first aim of the study was to further examine gender differences in OSA in China.

Studies have also indicated that other demographic variables are related to OSA experience. Men's interest in cybersex decreases with age while women's interest appears to remain stable (Daneback et al., 2005). Sexual orientation has also been found to be an important factor to consider in the study of OSA. Specifically, homosexual men were reported to be over four times more likely to have cybersex than do heterosexual men (Daneback et al., 2005). Moreover, Traeen, Nilsen, and Stigum (2006) found that gay and bisexual men reported more erotic chatting than heterosexual men.

In addition, research has shown that cross cultural differences exist in OSA. Specifically, Peruvians used the Internet significantly more than U.S. students to view sexually explicit material (SEM), find sexual partners, and search for sex-related information (Velezmoro et al., 2012). Thus, it seems that sociodemographic variables are related to OSA. Besides of age, sexual orientation, and culture, other sociodemographic variables may also related to OSA. For example, number of sex partners was related to OSA (Daneback et al., 2005; Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011). Income is positively related to sexual activity (Drydakis, 2013), and may be also related to OSA. Exploring the relationship between sociodemographic variables and OSA is the way to understand characters of OSA. The second aim of this study was therefore to examine the relationship between age, income, sexual experience, and relationship status and OSA in China.

Engaging in OSA can affect offline life. "Virtual" sex enables individuals to explore their own sexuality, engage in sexual activity they have not yet tried offline, and, in some cases, try activities that they have no intention of engaging in offline (Velezmoro et al., 2012). Moderate or light amounts of OSA can yield relationship benefits for both female and male users, including increases in the quality and frequency of sex, and increased intimacy with real partners (Grov, Gillespie, Royce, & Lever, 2011). However, OSA also can result in serious problems. Indeed, there is a rapid increase in the number of individuals with issues related to OSA (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002; Freeman-Longo, 2000). For instance, in a recent study in Sweden, 7% of women and 18% of men reported some problematic sexual Internet use (Ross, Månsson, & Daneback, 2012). Moreover, some studies have indicated that OSA use can affect life offline, including neglecting work and other duties (Turkle, 1995), which may also affect family life (Schneider, 2000, 2002; Whitty, 2003).

Therefore, it seems important to understand the psychological mechanisms that underlie OSA. There are several psychological variables that have been related to OSA experience. For instance, attitudes about sex and sexuality are related to OSA. Research has indicated that negative attitudes about sex and sexuality (i.e., erotophobia), as well as being more religious are associated with less OSA (Velezmoro et al., 2012). Moreover, Shaughnessy and colleagues (2011) found that individuals who reported positive attitudes toward OSA also reported more arousal-oriented OSA experience (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011). In addition, in the same study, attitude toward OSA mediated the relationship between gender and arousal-oriented OSA, which suggests that attitudes toward OSA may be important in understanding men's more frequent participation in arousal-oriented OSA (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011). Previous studies mainly focused the attitude toward sexuality and OSA. There are some psychological variables highly related to human offline sexual activities, such as sociosexuality (e.g. Penke & Asendorpf, 2008) and sexual sensation seeking (e.g. McCoul & Haslam, 2001). These variables highly related to offline sexual activities may also be related to OSA. Therefore, the third aim of this study was to

examine the relationships between psychological variables (sociosexuality and sexual sensation seeking) and OSA.

One important psychological variable to consider in the study of OSA is sensation seeking. Sensation seeking is thought to be a personality trait, characterized as "the tendency to prefer exciting, optimal, and novel levels of stimulation or arousal" (Kalichman et al., 1994, p. 386). Previous studies have found that sensation seeking scores are related to Internet abuse (Chaney & Chang, 2005; Lin & Tsai, 2001; Velezmoro, Lacefield, & Roberti, 2010) and online pornography exposure in male adolescents (Luder et al., 2011). Sensation seeking is also related to the use of social networking sites in Chinese students (Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 2012).

Sexual sensation seeking, a type of sensation seeking, is defined as "the propensity to attain optimal levels of sexual excitement and to engage in novel sexual experiences" (Kalichman et al., 1994, p. 387). Sexual sensation seeking is related to offline sexual behaviors (Chng & Geliga-Vargas, 2000; Matarelli, 2013; McCoul & Haslam, 2001; Parsons, Bimbi, & Halkitis, 2001; Spitalnick et al., 2007). However, the relationship between sexual sensation seeking and OSA is unclear. Therefore, the third aim of this study was to examine the relationship between sexual sensation seeking and OSA.

Sociosexuality (sociosexual orientation) is another important psychological characteristic to consider in the study of OSA, and refers to individual differences in openness to short-term sexual relationships, with sociosexual restriction referring to less openness (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Schmitt, 2005). Shaughnessy, Byers, and Walsh (2011) found that sociosexuality was correlated to OSA, but did not significantly predict OSA. Importantly, Shaughnessy, Byers, and Walsh (2011) assessed sociosexuality as a single dimension, including behavior and attitude. However, it has been suggested that sociosexuality comprises three dimensions: behavior, attitude, and desire (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Therefore, the present study extended the work of Shaughnessy and colleagues by examining the relationship between sociosexuality and OSA with the revised multi-dimensional scale of sociosexuality.

Despite increasing acknowledgement that it is important to understand the impact the Internet has on sexuality, (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002), almost all existing work in this area has been conducted in Western nations (US, Canada, Sweden, and Peru). To our knowledge, there are no studies examining OSA in Mainland China. This may be important to investigate as it was recently reported that online sexual partner seeking was related to risk behaviors among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Taiwan (Ko et al., 2012). Moreover, in July 2013, there were 591 million (45% of Chinese population) Internet users and Internet penetration is 44.1% in China (CNNIC, 2013). Compared with other countries, the mean score of sociosexuality was very low for Chinese men and women, indicating sociosexuality was restricted in both sexes in China and Chinese men and women are more restricted to short-term sexual relationship (Zheng, Zhou, Wang, & Hesketh, 2013). As previously mentioned, sociosexuality was correlated to OSA (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011). In sociosexuality relatively less restricted nations, OSA is common for men and women. It is unclear how Internet users gain access to sexual information via the Internet in a more restricted nation. Therefore, this study will be one of the first to investigate online sexual activities in a non-Western nation.

In sum, this study examines the online sexual activities of Chinese Internet users. We focused on gender differences in OSA as a primary aim, and examined differences on other sociodemographic variables, including age, income, sexual experience, and relationship status. We also examined the influence of sexual sensation seeking and sociosexuality on OSA, as well as how these two factors may mediate the relation between gender and OSA.

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