

The Relationship Between Self-Reported Sexually Explicit Media Consumption and Sexual Risk Behaviors Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in China



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Previous studies have indicated that viewing sexually explicit media (SEM) might be associated with sexual risk behaviors in men who have sex with men (MSM). However, most prior research has not explored this association cross-culturally or the potential influence that important covariates might have on the association.

Aim: To explore the association between self-reports of viewing SEM depicting various sexual risk behaviors and engagement in sexual risk behaviors after controlling for relevant covariates in MSM in China.

Methods: Three hundred fourteen Chinese MSM participated in a web-based survey.

Main Outcome Measures: SEM consumption, sexual risk behavior, and measurements of covariates.

Results: SEM consumption was frequent in MSM in China. Viewing a larger proportion of SEM depicting sexual risk behaviors was associated with a larger number of regular partners with whom MSM reported engaging in sexual risk behaviors, but not with the number of casual partners, after controlling for covariates. HIV-related knowledge and seeking male sex partners were associated with the number of regular partners with whom MSM had engaged in sexual risk behaviors. Seeking sexual sensation, HIV-related knowledge, and seeking male sex partners were associated with the number of casual partners with whom MSM had engaged in sexual risk behaviors.

Conclusion: Future research exploring the relation between SEM use and sexual health risk behaviors should consider theoretically important psychological and behavioral covariates. **Xu Y, Zheng Y, Rahman Q. The Relationship Between Self-Reported Sexually Explicit Media Consumption and Sexual Risk Behaviors Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in China. J Sex Med 2017;14:357–365.**

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Key Words: Sexually Explicit Media; Pornography; Men Who Have Sex With Men; Sexual Risk Behaviors; Sexual Sensation Seeking; HIV-Related Knowledge; China

INTRODUCTION

Meta-analyses have indicated that the prevalence of HIV in men who have sex with men (MSM) in China is substantial, with an estimated prevalence ranging from 2.5% to 5.3% and increasing.^{1–5} Further research has suggested that unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) is a major risk factor for HIV infection in MSM and that the prevalence of UAI in MSM is high in China (the estimated prevalence of UAI was 50% from 2008 through 2012).^{6–9} Further studies are needed to explore the factors associated with UAI and other sexual risk behaviors in MSM in China to better target behavioral prevention strategies.

Prior studies have described many factors associated with UAI in MSM in China, including the venues where MSM meet sex partners, substance use, number of sex partners, levels of impulsivity, education, and intentions to use condoms.^{10–13} However, the potential association of another factor, sexually explicit media (SEM) consumption, with sexual risk behaviors in MSM in China has not been examined until the present study.

SEM CONSUMPTION IN MSM

In China, sex education in schools on topics considered socially taboo (eg, sexuality, HIV, and same-sex sexual orientation) is very limited.¹⁴ Research also indicates that very few parents provide education or knowledge about sex.¹⁵ Thus, men attracted to men or MSM might seek out alternative sources of sexual information, including SEM. Although no studies have explored SEM consumption in MSM in China, prior studies have indicated that the SEM consumption is common and

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frequent in MSM in Western countries.^{16,17} Thus, SEM consumption also might be frequent in MSM in China.

SEM CONSUMPTION AND SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIORS IN MSM

Viewing SEM can have positive influences on the sexual health of MSM.^{18,19} For example, viewing SEM can aid in the learning of performing same-sex sex,^{20,21} promote self-recognition of same-sex attractions,^{20,22} and clarify sexual self-labels.²³ However, SEM depicting male same-sex acts often contain several potentially risky sexual behaviors associated with the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, including UAI, ejaculation in the mouth (EM), and ejaculation in or on or rubbed into the anus (EA).²⁴ Some studies have associated the viewing of SEM with sexual risk behaviors in MSM.^{25,26} Naturally, without the benefit of longitudinal designs, such studies (including the present study) cannot test for causality and necessarily rely on self-report. However, cross-sectional survey studies can help to clarify definitions of the relevant factors (eg, SEM use) and lend plausibility to hypotheses on the origins of the association between SEM and sexual risk behavior. Cross-sectional survey methods also are often the only way to access under-represented or sexual minority populations, especially in cultural contexts in which certain sexual behaviors or sexual identities are highly stigmatized (eg, China). Critically, they can guide future prospective empirical work by identifying the kinds of factors that might be important to focus on.

It is important to note that many prior studies have yielded inconsistent results. Some studies have failed to show an association between SEM consumption and safer sex practice beliefs, or interests in having UAI.^{27,28} One study reported that more attention or exposure to condom-less SEM was associated with decreased safe-sex intentions.²⁹ Another study observed a marginal association between condom-less SEM consumption and engaging in UAI in MSM who viewed SEM longer than 1 hour per day.¹⁶ Some studies also have associated greater SEM consumption with greater odds of engaging in UAI^{26,30–33} or serodiscordant UAI,²⁵ having more male sexual partners,³⁴ and more interest in group sex.³⁵

LIMITATIONS OF PRIOR RESEARCH

Some limitations of prior research require comment. Although several studies used the total time spent viewing SEM as a measurement of SEM consumption, they did not differentiate the time spent viewing SEM depicting safer sexual behaviors (eg, anal sex with condom) from sexual risk behaviors (eg, UAI).^{27,28} For example, compared with MSM who viewed SEM depicting safe sex or conventional sex, MSM who watched a greater range of sex acts tended to specifically view UAI more frequently, have greater SEM consumption, and have lower condom use self-efficacy (CUSE).³⁶ Thus, individuals with the

same SEM viewing times might view SEM depicting diverse sexual behaviors. Research also has suggested that total time spent viewing SEM is not associated with engagement in sexual risk behaviors. Instead, viewing a larger proportion of SEM depicting UAI has been associated with engagement in more UAI.^{16,30} Thus, it could be important to make a distinction between the times spent viewing SEM depicting safer sexual behaviors and SEM depicting sexual risk behaviors. Prior studies also have tended to focus on UAI as the sexual risk behavior or the behavior of interest as depicted in the SEM.^{25,26} However, SEM depicting male same-sex acts often contain several potentially high-risk sexual behaviors including exchange of semen, EM, and EA, which require further study.²⁴

Almost all prior studies have focused on ethnically white men. Given the potential implications for global sexual health in MSM, especially those from developing nations, the association between SEM consumption and sexual risk behavior also should be tested in non-Western samples. Replication of the hypothesized associations in such samples lends plausibility to the proposed mechanisms underlying any associations in Western samples.

Previous research has focused mainly on UAI with casual partners^{16,27} or has not differentiated UAI with regular partners from UAI with casual partners.^{30,31} Research has suggested that UAI with regular partners occurs frequently in MSM.^{37,38} Findings from MSM in five US cities estimated that 68% of HIV transmissions were from regular partners.³⁹ A meta-analysis also showed that the estimated prevalence of UAI with regular male partners is 45% in MSM in China.⁹ Thus, examining reports of UAI with regular partners is important for further research.

Most prior research has not explored the potential influence that relevant covariates (eg, those reviewed earlier) have on the association between SEM consumption and sexual risk behaviors. CUSE could be an important mediating factor,^{32,33} but the role of other covariates, including the degree of sexual arousal when viewing SEM, socio-sexual orientation (SOI), seeking sexual sensation (SSS), internalized homophobia (IH), HIV-related knowledge, and seeking male sex partners, is poorly studied. Sexual arousal could be an important covariate because prior research has indicated that MSM who find SEM depicting various sexual risk behaviors sexually arousing might be more likely to engage in those behaviors than MSM who are not as sexually aroused.⁴⁰

SOI is a trait that refers to an overall preference for short-term or uncommitted sexual relationships.⁴¹ One study in China reported that SOI behavior and desire subscale scores were associated with online sexual activity (including viewing SEM).⁴² Other studies have associated unrestricted socio-sexuality with a greater odds of engagement in unprotected sexual intercourse⁴³ and a larger number of lifetime sex partners.^{44,45} Importantly, these relations have been reported in studies focusing on heterosexual individuals and not on MSM.

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