The new avenue of online sexual activity in China: The smartphone

Lijun Zheng a, b, *, Xuan Zhang b, Yingshi Feng b

a Key Laboratory of Cognition and Personality (Southwest University), Ministry of Education, China
b Faculty of Psychology, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

Abstract

We investigated the prevalence of online sexual activity (OSA) via smartphone and personal computer (PC), as well as the psychological mechanisms underlying OSA via smartphone and PC. OSA were categorized as viewing sexually explicit material (SEM), sexual partner seeking, cybersex, and flirting. Participants (N = 505) completed measures of OSA experience via smartphone and PC within the past 12 months. Sexual sensation seeking (the propensity to attain optimal levels of sexual excitement and to engage in novel sexual experiences) and sociosexuality (openness to uncommitted sexual relations) were assessed to examine the psychological mechanisms underlying OSA. The reported prevalence of OSA via smartphone and PC was high (88.32% and 86.34%, respectively). There was no significant difference in the prevalence and frequency of solitary-arousal OSA (i.e., viewing SEM) between smartphone and PC access, while in partnered-arousal OSA (i.e., partner seeking, cybersex, and flirting) the prevalence and frequency via smartphone was higher than via PC. Men reported a higher prevalence and frequency of OSA than women via both smartphone and PC. In addition, sexual sensation seeking and sociosexuality were positively related to OSA via smartphone and PC. The results indicate that the smartphone has become an important avenue to access sexuality online.

1. Introduction

1.1. Online sexual activity

Access, affordability, and anonymity have made the Internet to become a new medium for sexual activity (Cooper, 1998; Cooper, Månsson, Daneback, Tikkanen, & Ross, 2003). Online sexual activity (OSA) refers to any activity that involves sexuality, including "recreation, entertainment, exploration, information about sexual problems and concerns, education, purchasing of sexual materials, the search for sexual partners, sexual arousal, downloading and sharing of sexual material, sexually explicit discussions, and so on" (Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002, p. 106). OSA can be categorized into non-arousal (e.g., seeking sexuality information), solitary-arousal (e.g., viewing sexually explicit materials), and partnered-arousal OSA (e.g., sharing sexual fantasies) (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011). There is also a subcategory of OSA called cybersex, which is defined as "when two or more people are engaging in sexual talk while online for the purposes of sexual pleasure and may or may not include masturbation" (Daneback, Cooper, & Månsson, 2005, p. 321).

1.2. Prevalence of smartphone to access the internet in China

Smartphones and personal computers (PC) have become important devices to surf the Internet and have greatly influenced our way of life. PCs used to be the main equipment to connect to the Internet, while smartphones and other mobile devices have brought us into the mobile Internet era (CNNIC, 2014a). Official data from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) showed that as early as 2014, smartphones occupied 91.1% of mobile Internet users (CNNIC, 2014b). In 2015, 90.1% users used a mobile phone (mainly smartphone users) to surf the Internet, while only 67.6% and 38.7% of users used desktop and notebook to surf the Internet, respectively (CNNIC, 2016); thus, the greatest impact that smartphones have brought to PCs is the rapidly dropping usage rate for social and entertainment applications (CNNIC, 2014b). Mobile social activities, mobile shopping, mobile financing, and mobile information have become increasingly common in our life (CNNIC, 2014b). Of course, PCs still have their own unique advantages, such as comfortable browsing experience, high capacity of storage, multiple operating modes, and multiple extended
functions; thus, PCs still occupy important aspects in our daily life.

1.3. Previous studies: personal computers, smartphones, and OSA

The majority of studies have indicated a high prevalence of OSA across multiple cultures (e.g., Daneback et al., 2005; Shaughnessy & Byers, 2013; Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). Men engage in more OSA dimensions than women do, such as viewing sexually explicit material (SEM) (Cooper et al., 2002; Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2001; Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011; Velezmoreo, Negy, & Livia, 2012; Zheng & Zheng, 2014), partnered-arousal OSA (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011; Zheng & Zheng, 2014), and cybersex (Daneback et al., 2005; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). A previous study indicated that participants were using the network society to substitute or supplement offline romantic and sexual relationships with online ones (Craft, 2012). In recent years, researchers have begun to pay attention to the relationship between smartphones and OSA, and related studies can be roughly divided into two types.

The first type examined men who have sex with men (MSM): Studies found that the penetration of smartphones among MSM was usually high (Hirshfield, Parsons, Anderson, & Chiasson, 2015; Richman, Webb, Brinkley, & Martin, 2014). Men who used both the Internet and mobile applications (apps) to seek partners were younger and had higher incomes than those who used the Internet only (Grosskopf, Levasseur, & Glaser, 2014). App users were more likely to be sexually active in general, had more sexual partners (Bien et al., 2015; Holloway, Pulsipher, Gibbs, Barman-Adhikari, & Rice, 2015; Lehmiller & Joerger, 2014), and were more likely to have engaged in (unsupported) anal intercourse and condom-less anal sex (CAS) with men (Hirshfield, Grov, Parsons, Anderson, & Chiasson, 2015). However, researchers found no significant differences between those who used the Internet only and those who used both Internet and mobile apps, indicating that the use of mobile-based apps for sex-seeking may be simply an example of evolving technologies (Grosskopf et al., 2014).

The second type mainly examined sexual health apps. A survey revealed that 67% reported interest in using a free app that could improve or manage their sexual health. Compared with men and those engaging in less sexual activity, women and those engaging in more sexual activity were more likely to be interested in using such apps (Richman et al., 2014). In addition, some research provided introduction and analysis about sexual health apps (Lupton, 2015; Sun, Stowers, Miller, Bachmann, & Rhodes, 2015). Mobile apps “used to self-track features of users’ sexual and reproductive activities and functions… represent sexuality and reproduction in certain defined and limited ways that work to perpetuate normative stereotypes and assumptions about women and men as sexual and reproductive subjects” (Lupton, 2015, p. 1). Established apps designed for MSM may be both acceptable and feasible platforms to promote HIV/STD testing (Sun et al., 2015).

1.4. Psychological mechanisms: sexual sensation seeking and sociosexuality

Sexual sensation seeking is a type of sensation seeking that 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). Previous research mainly explored the relationship between sexual sensation seeking and offline sexual activity. Specifically, higher sexual sensation seeking has been associated with more vaginal and anal sex partners and sexual risk behaviors (Gutiérrez-Martínez, Bermúdez, Teva, & Buela-Casal, 2007; Heidinger, Gorgens, & Morgenstern, 2015; Hong et al., 2012; Mashegoane, Moalusi, Ngoepe, & Peltzer, 2002; Matarrelli, 2013; Mccoul & Haslam, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2012). Moreover, recent studies found that sexual sensation seeking is associated with high frequency of OSA (Hung-Yi, Li-Chun, Tsai-Shin, Hsin-Ya, & Hui-Yen, 2014; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). Sociosexuality refers to “individual differences in willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relations” (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991, p. 872). Research in both Western and non-Western countries found that sociosexuality was correlated to OSA, indicating the cross-cultural universality of this relationship (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). In sum, sexual sensation seeking and sociosexuality are linked to both offline and online sexual activity. This indicates that common mechanisms (i.e., sexual sensation seeking and sociosexuality) that underlie offline sexual activities may also play a role in online sexual activities (Zheng & Zheng, 2014). However, it is unclear whether the same psychological mechanisms underlie OSA across different logging devices (PC vs. smartphone). Researchers pointed out that the increasing use of mobile-based apps for sex-seeking may simply be an expression of the evolving technologies and may have no essential difference to the use of computers (Grosskopf et al., 2014). Thus, this study examined whether sexual sensation seeking and sociosexuality influence OSA via personal computer and smartphone in the same way to test whether the same psychological mechanisms underlie OSA across different logging devices.

1.5. Present study

The influence of logging equipment on OSA did not receive much attention until smartphones became popular in recent years; therefore, studies that explored the relationship between PC and OSA were very limited, although almost all of the past OSA study participants were PC users. This study aimed to examine the prevalence of OSA via smartphone compared to OSA via PC, as well as the psychological mechanisms underlying OSA via smartphone and OSA via PC.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

This study was conducted online via the Chinese professional survey website Wenyuanxing (www.sojump.com, a website similar to SurveyMonkey). The sample of this study was recruited from the Internet and received a message that enclosed our survey website and a brief introduction of the survey. Participants who were interested in the survey could complete the survey via our website. All of the participants (N = 505) in this survey had used both smartphone and PC (including desktop and notebook computers) and included 320 men and 185 women from 130 cities in 30 of the 34 provinces/regions in China. The mean age of the sample was 27.60 years (SD = 4.1 years), ranging from 20 to 42 years. Additional demographic information is presented in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Background questionnaire

This questionnaire was used to assess participants’ age, gender, income, relationship status, education level, occupation, sexual experience, and sexual orientation.

2.2.2. Online sexual activity scale

In this study, we revised the OSA scale, which had been used once in a previous study (Zheng & Zheng, 2014). This scale includes 13 items that measure participants’ use of the Internet for: (1)
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