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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The use of pornography and sexual behaviour among Norwegian men and women of differing sexual orientation[☆]

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KEYWORDS

Sexual orientation;
Gender;
Sexual behaviour;
Pornography;
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Summary

Objective. – The purpose of this study was to investigate the consumption of pornography and sexual behaviour in a sample of adult Norwegians of differing sexual orientation.

Methodology. – A random sample of 12,000, 18–59 years-old, Norwegians was drawn from the Population Register. Data collection was carried out by anonymous questionnaires. A total of 2381 persons responded (response rate 20%).

Results. – Ninety-four percent of all men, 92% of lesbians/bisexuals, and 67% of heterosexual women reported exposure to pornography. The estimated mean percent of the time having used pornography when masturbating was 51% among gays/bisexuals, 42% among heterosexual men, 24% among lesbians/bisexuals, and 12% among heterosexual women. Gays/bisexuals reported having used pornography when having partner sex 10% of the time, compared to 4% among heterosexuals.

Conclusion. – Among heterosexual men, the use of pornography was associated with sexual activity and sexual experimentation often portrayed in pornography. There was also some evidence of an association between use of pornography during partner sex and sexual risk behaviour in gay/bisexual men.

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Introduction

The past decades, pornography has become part of fashion, art, music videos and youth culture, and also increasingly available to people on the Internet. This development may explain why people's attitudes toward pornography in the Nordic countries have become more positive the past decades (Lewin et al., 2000; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003; Træen et al., 2004). A clear majority of Norwegian men, and a large minority of adult women expressed positive attitudes towards pornography. Three dimensions

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of attitudes toward pornography have been described, namely attitudes towards pornography as means of sexual enhancement, as a moral issue, and as an indicator of the social climate, particularly among the younger population segments. Attitudes towards pornography as means of sexual enhancement seems most important for the frequency of use (Træen et al., 2004).

Ninety percent of Norwegians older than 15 years of age reported exposure to pornography at some point in their life (Træen et al., 2004). Another study among Norwegians, 18–49 years-old, showed that 97% of men and 73% of women reported having been exposed to pornography in magazines, films or on the Internet (Træen et al., 2006).

The consumption of pornography is shown to vary with gender, age, relationship status, and sexual orientation (Carroll et al., 2008; Lewin et al., 2000; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003; Stulhofer et al., 2010; Træen et al., 2004, 2006). Younger, males, single, and gay/bisexuals appear disproportionately high consumers of pornography, and disproportionately at high risk for sexually transmitted infections including HIV (Hald and Malamuth, 2008; Lewin et al., 2000; Træen et al., 2006).

While men often tend to view pornography alone during masturbation, women most often view porn in the company of a partner (Lewin et al., 2000; Træen et al., 2006; Daneback et al., 2008). Thus, a woman's partner is essential for her use of pornography (Lewin et al., 2000; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003; Træen et al., 2006). Another finding is that there is a positive relationship between number of sex partners and number of pornographic films seen during the past 12 months (Lewin et al., 2000). This may relate to a finding from Finland where the use of pornography seemed to be an activity for highly sexually active individuals (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003). This makes pornography a relevant topic study in relation to the HIV pandemic.

There is some evidence of a relationship between use of pornography and increased high-risk behaviour in heterosexuals. For instance, a high exposure to pornography was found in a Swedish study among heterosexual young male STI clinic attendees (Tyden and Rogala, 2004). In this sample, 57% also reported heterosexual anal sex. There are indications that the exposure to pornography is associated with increased interest in experimenting with anal sex (Rogala and Tydén, 2003; Tyden and Rogala, 2004).

In recent years one has started to question to which degree pornography influences people's sexual behaviour and the perception of what is normal and natural. This is of interest in a sexual health perspective, and particularly with regards to HIV/AIDS, and practicing safer sex in men who have sex with men (MSM) – whether they define themselves as gay, bisexual or heterosexual. Regarding HIV risk, both the number of male partners and unprotected anal intercourse with male partners appears to be increasing in Internet-mediated liaisons, internationally (Davidovich et al., 2004; Elford et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2001; Ross et al., 2000; Rosser et al., 2009a, b). It is therefore important to learn more about the relationship between sexual behaviour and the use of pornography in various sub-groups of the population with differing sexual orientation. We do not know what relationship, if any, exists between pornography consumption and HIV risk behaviours. Is the use of pornography a risk factor, a protective factor, both or neither?

The purpose of the current study was to investigate exposure to and consumption of pornography among adult Norwegians of differing sexual orientation, and to study the relationship between pornography consumption and HIV-risk behaviour.

Methods

The National Institute of Public Health's sexual behaviour survey of 2008 was the fifth in a series of surveys on sexual behaviour and health in Norway. The previous surveys were conducted in 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2002.

A random sample of 12,000 Norwegians between 18 and 59 years of age was drawn from the Population Register of Norway. Data collection was carried out by means of anonymous, mailed questionnaires. The participants were also given the possibility of responding to the survey via Internet. One reminder letter and a copy of the questionnaire were sent out two weeks after initial contact. The participants received no compensation for completing the questionnaires. A total of 300 persons returned the questionnaires blank. Excluding 254 questionnaires that were returned unopened due to unknown/lack of forwarding address, a net sample of 11,746 individuals was left. A total of 2381 persons responded to the questionnaire survey (of these 325 responded via the Web). Including the 300 who returned the questionnaire blank, the response rate was 23%. Excluding blank questionnaires, the response rate was 20%.

The questionnaire covered topics such as sociodemographic background, age at first sexual intercourse, number of partners, use of contraception, experience with group sex, extradyadic activity, and sexual problems. Additionally, variables on the use of the Internet for sex and love purposes adapted from Cooper et al. (2003), and variables on the use of pornography adapted from Hald (2007), were included.

In the final sample, there was a higher percentage of women (59%) than men (41%), and more persons with a higher level of education than not (8% of the sample reported having 9 years or less of education, 26% reported 10–12 years' education, 24% had 13–14 years, and 42% reported 15+ years of education).

Measures

Pornography exposure and consumption

Pornography exposure and consumption was measured by using a version of Hald's (2007) definition from the Danish studies on pornography: "With pornography we mean any kind of material containing explicit exposure and/or descriptions of the genitals, and clear and explicit sexual acts. Note! Materials containing men and women posing or acting naked (Playboy/-girl, advertisements, films, etc.), and which do not contain «clear and explicit sexual acts» are not regarded as pornography in this study. One may be exposed to pornography more or less randomly and unintentionally, for instance seeing the cover of a pornographic magazine/film at the gasoline station, in a video store, etc. Likewise one may have seen pornography in connection with sex education at school, or as a story on the television news,

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