

A Trio of Turmoil for Internet Sexually Addicted Men Who Have Sex with Men: Boredom Proneness, Social Connectedness, and Dissociation

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This article explores the impact of boredom proneness, social connectedness, and online dissociation in Internet sexually addicted men who have sex with men (MSM). Increased levels of boredom, diminished social connections, and dissociative symptoms while engaged in excessive online sexual activities are conceptualized as components that facilitate and maintain Internet sexual addiction. An overview of the literature pertaining to extreme online sexual behavior among MSM is presented and the constructs of boredom proneness, social connectedness, and dissociation are delineated. Assessment strategies for helping professionals who work with sexually addicted MSM are discussed. Implications for future research are presented.

As a result of the Internet's overwhelming presence in our culture, the number of individuals acquiring online access is increasing. Nua Analysis (2003) estimates that over 605 million individuals worldwide are current Internet users and 54% of Americans access the Internet in any given one-month period. Computerworld (as cited in Cooper, Boies, Maheu, & Greenfield, 2000) estimated that 15 million individuals access the Internet each day, exploring more than 200 million web sites. The Internet has impacted nearly every aspect of human existence, including education, medicine, language, relationships, the environment, and human sexuality.

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For stigmatized populations, such as men who have sex with men (MSM), the Internet provides a perceived sense of safety and a discreet arena to express their sexuality without fear of repercussions. The term “men who have sex with men” is used to refer to those males who identify as gay, bisexual, bi-curious, and/or heterosexual who engage in sexual activity with other males (i.e., some married males engage in sexual behavior with other males, but do not identify as gay or bisexual). The number of gay individuals who access the Internet is expected to reach 22.4 million by 2005 (Computer Economics, 2000). Cooper, Delmonico and Burg (2000) reported that gay males were more likely than heterosexual males to access the Internet for sexual purposes. The reason for this phenomenon is not clearly understood; however, one explanation is that the Internet allows gay males to become a normalized population online (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000). Due to the expected increases in the number of MSM who access the Internet, in conjunction with the continued rise in new HIV infections among MSM, exploring the online sexual behavior of this population is crucial. The purpose of this article is to discuss the impact the Internet has on the compulsive sexual behavior of some MSM. Individual characteristics of sexually compulsive MSM who express their addiction via the Internet, specifically, boredom proneness, social connectedness, and online dissociation, are discussed as possible factors that maintain online sexually compulsive activities. For the purpose of this article and consistent with the literature, the terms “sexual addiction” and “sexual compulsivity” will be used interchangeably.

MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN (MSM) AND THE INTERNET

Increasingly MSM are experimenting with the Internet as an arena to express their sexuality. At any given moment on America Online, there are over 500 chat rooms devoted to males seeking other males. Internet chat rooms have become normalized within MSM culture as a forum to meet other men. The Internet for many men has replaced traditional meeting grounds, such as gay bars.

Empirical studies exploring the role of the Internet among sexually compulsive MSM are limited. Much of the research exploring MSM's online behavior has focused on sexual activity in relation to HIV/AIDS (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002; Halkitis & Parsons, 2003), sexually transmitted disease prevention (Kim, Kent, McFarland, & Klausner, 2001), and risk behavior (Rhodes, DiClemente, Cecil, Hergenrather, & Yee, 2002). Cooper, Delmonico et al. (2000) found gay and bisexual males more likely to be in a cybersex compulsive group than heterosexual males and females. Sexually addicted MSM who access Internet chat rooms were found to be geographically isolated, young, in the process of coming out, and not likely to identify as gay

(Tikkanen & Ross, 2000). In addition, MSM chat room visitors are less likely to be tested for HIV and more likely to engage in high-risk sexual activity, such as unprotected anal sex than non-chat room visitors (Benostch et al., 2002; Parsons, Bimbi, & Halkitis, 2001; Tikkanen & Ross, 2000). Lastly, gay men who access the Internet to arrange face-to-face sexual encounters reported higher use of nitrate inhalants and methamphetamines in combination with Viagra to increase the intensity of the sexual experience (Benostch et al., 2002).

Empirical research pertaining to what MSM do when they are online and the reasons why they access the Internet also are limited. Dew and Chaney (2004a) proposed (a) information gathering, (b) anonymity, (c) self-medication, (d) escape, (e) less discrimination, and (f) lack of social outlets as primary reasons why gay males use the Internet. Once online, many MSM engage in a variety of sexual activities including visiting chat rooms, implementing net meetings and web cams, viewing sexually explicit web sites, utilizing online classifieds and personal advertisements, joining online community bulletin boards, and trading sexually explicit material (Dew & Chaney, 2004a). Knowing how and why MSM use the Internet as a form of sexual expression facilitates understanding of the process of online sexual addiction among this population. However, empirical research examining personality traits, individual characteristics, and online experiences of compulsive MSM is minimal.

Chaney and Dew (2003) conducted online interviews with sexually compulsive MSM and found common themes related to their online sexual experiences. Participants' reported an inability to manage habitual online sexual behavior. Denial related to negative consequences of Internet sexual behavior was characteristic of all participants. In addition, respondents described perceived increases in self-esteem after sexually acting-out, which was associated with mood alterations as a result of online sexual behavior. Participants described symptoms of dissociation and depersonalization when engaged in online sexual activity, such as loss of a sense of time, loss of self-identity, and disconnection from thoughts, feelings, and actions. Lastly, poor relationships were described by all participants. The sample of sexually compulsive MSM lacked close friendships and experienced diminished ties with family. The authors however, did not conceptualize how these pertinent factors potentially foster and maintain Internet sexual addiction.

In summary, many sexually addicted MSM are increasingly accessing the Internet as an expression of their compulsivity. In the current paper, the authors propose that there are specific psychosocial characteristics of sexually addicted MSM, which help maintain online sexual addiction. Boredom proneness, social connectedness, and dissociation are discussed as potential factors that maintain Internet sexual addiction. Specifically, the authors propose that these constructs are a gateway for to online sexual addiction among MSM.

BOREDOM PRONENESS

The term boredom is frequently used to describe individuals' daily experiences. Movies, books, and people might be described as boring and some appraise their mood as, "bored," without understanding what the construct boredom entails. Sundberg, Latkin, Farmer, and Saoud (1991) described boredom as the tendency to experience monotony, lack personal involvement and motivation, and have a lack of interest in one's life and future. Mikulas and Vodanovich (1993) narrowed the construct of boredom as a state of minimal arousal and dissatisfaction, which is generally caused by an understimulating environment. Boredom might be understood as a psychological state that often is transient. Boredom prone individuals are described as experiencing periods of depression, loneliness, hopelessness, lack of motivation, distraction, and dissatisfaction (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986).

Empirical research exploring the concept of boredom is vast, including, boredom being linked to self-awareness (Seib & Vodanovich, 1998), physical and psychological well-being (Sommers & Vodanovich, 2000), sleep patterns (Tolor, 1989), and psychosocial development (Watt & Vodanovich, 1999). Additionally, Farmer and Sundberg (1986) and Vodanovich, Verner, and Gilbride (1991) found significant relationships between boredom proneness and depression, anxiety, hopelessness, loneliness, and hostility.

Relationships between boredom proneness, specific addictions, and compulsive behaviors also have been explored. Samuels and Samuels (1974) found boredom to be a common cause of drug abuse. Boredom prone individuals have been found to be more likely to use drugs or alcohol to escape the feeling of boredom (Harris, 2000). Blaszczynski, McConaghy, and Frankova (1990) found that pathological gamblers reported higher levels of boredom proneness than non-addicted gamblers. McCormick (1988) reported higher levels of under-stimulation and increased levels of boredom among his sample gamblers. The results of the latter two studies have implications for boredom proneness among online sexually compulsive MSM because, like pathological gambling, sexual addiction is chronic, progressive, and behavioral. However, boredom proneness has not been discussed as a feature of sexual compulsivity. Recently, Gana, Trouillet, Martin, and Toffart (2001) found males more likely than females to experience boredom and to engage in solitary sexual behaviors, such as masturbating and viewing pornographic videos. These authors did not assess for sexual compulsivity, sexual orientation, or Internet use among their sample.

Three components provide potential evidence that boredom proneness may be related to online sexual compulsivity among MSM: internalized homophobia, virtual environment and variety, and tolerance. In one study, sexually addicted MSM chat room users reported higher levels of internalized homophobia than MSM chat room users who were not sexually addicted (Dew & Chaney, 2004b). Internalized homophobia may be a factor in some

MSM's engaging in sexual behavior that is discreet and anonymous, as is often associated with online behavior, due to fear about being discovered as a male who enjoys sexual expression with other males. These individuals also might be less likely to involve themselves in offline activities that affirm their sexual orientation or same-sex attractions, such as attending bars, pride events, or educational seminars created specifically for MSM, due to fear about being identified as a MSM. Furthermore, these men might not be motivated to express their sexuality openly, resulting in anonymous, discreet, online sexual expression. Feelings of shame and guilt about sexual identity are likely to arise. MSM who experience these emotions might feel the need to keep same-sex feelings undisclosed and to live a life of routine that provides safety from disclosure. The combination of managing one's life based on routine, so as not to allow homoerotic feelings to be discovered, and the lack of involvement in offline affirming activities might lead MSM to evaluate their lives as tedious, thereby fostering feelings of boredom. To escape feelings of boredom, MSM might utilize the Internet for sexual stimulation.

The virtual environment provides MSM an escape from boredom by providing an arena to express one's same-gendered attractions discreetly. The online sexual environment provides a perceived excitement, which temporarily alleviates one's boredom. If, for example, sexually compulsive men perceive their offline environment as lacking satisfaction and stimulation, they may turn to online sexual activity for immediate stimulation. A constant cycle of experiencing boredom, engaging in online sexual stimulation, and the temporary relief of boredom allows online sexual behavior to be positively reinforced. This may result in sexually compulsive MSM using the Internet to regulate proneness to boredom. In addition to online environments providing an escape from boredom, they also provides a variety of stimulating sexual behaviors in which an individual might engage. Dew and Chaney (2004a) proposed that some compulsive MSM access the Internet because of the diversity of online sexual expression. Therefore, it is possible that expression of addictive sexuality via the Internet is a way some MSM compensate for a monotonous offline environment. Sundberg et al. (1991) described boredom as experiencing monotony in a non-stimulating environment. It then seems plausible that boredom proneness could be a characteristic of online sexually addicted MSM.

The construct of tolerance must be explored as a possible link between boredom proneness and online sexual addiction. Tolerance has been discussed as one component of sexual addiction (Cooper & Lebo, 2001). An addicted individual needs to experience greater sexual intensity in order to achieve the same "rush" that he has experienced in the past because the current level of intensity is no longer sufficient. For example, some MSM begin to express online sexual addiction by viewing explicit web sites. Some men may become desensitized to the pornographic images because the graphics become invariable and monotonous. New sexual stimuli to produce

the same response are needed. Therefore, many MSM may access chat rooms to meet potential partners for cybersex or offline sexual encounters, which may be perceived as more stimulating than the graphics. Eventually, chat rooms might be evaluated as boring because they no longer give an addicted MSM the same “rush.” Chaney and Dew (2003) reported that a small sample of sexually addicted MSM described chat rooms as “boring” at times. Once individuals experience tedium with cybersex and offline sexual encounters, which were arranged in chat rooms, drugs and sexual risk taking behaviors, such as unprotected sex, may be introduced to keep the experience stimulating. This progressive cycle potentially explains online addicted MSM attempts at removing monotony, increasing arousal, and introducing environmental stimulation, all of which delineate boredom proneness, which could be the foundation of tolerance as described in sexual addiction literature. In addition to boredom proneness, another factor that potentially maintains online sexual addiction is to what degree an MSM is socially connected.

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Sexually compulsive MSM who express their addiction online are likely to have diminished social connections because of the isolation associated with Internet use. Social connectedness refers to a dimension of the self that mirrors a subjective awareness of interpersonal closeness with the social world, which is based on proximal and distal relationships (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Individuals who lack social connectedness have been described as aloof and detached and reject interpersonal closeness (Baker & Baker, 1987). Individuals with low social connectedness are more prone to struggle with low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Kohut, 1984). In addition, individuals with low social connectedness are less likely to trust others, which may lead to social withdrawal.

Among MSM, social connectedness is worthy to explore because it has implications for prevention and treatment of compulsive online sexual behavior. However, social connectedness has not been conceptualized among this population. It seems probable that some sexually compulsive MSM who act out online lack social connectedness, primarily due to the consequences associated with spending large amounts of time online seeking sexual activity. Several studies have explored the effects of frequent Internet use on individuals' social systems and found associations with increased isolation, decreased family communication, smaller social circles, and increased loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998; Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000). In addition, Mesch (2001) found frequent Internet users reported having fewer close friends and lack of support among existing relationships. These effects are likely to promote and maintain the secrecy and loneliness associated with online sexual addiction.

Marginalized populations such as MSM are likely to experience diminished social connectedness for several reasons. First, the stigma associated with same-sex attractions cause many men not to disclose their sexual orientation or desires to family and friends. The fear associated with being “discovered” may cause men to withdraw and isolate themselves. Furthermore, some MSM are married to women, have girlfriends, have children, or any combination of the three. Often these men will not reveal their “dual” lives to their significant others in order to keep the relationships intact. They may feel the only way to meet men is in discreet arenas, such as Internet chat rooms or online classifieds.

Second, online sexually compulsive MSM are likely to experience poor social connectedness due to the amount of time spent online. It is not uncommon for sexually compulsive men to spend more than 25 hours per week online pursuing sexual activities (Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002). In a qualitative examination of online experiences among sexually addicted MSM, participants reported that large amounts of time spent online engaged in sexual activity or seeking sexual partners in chat rooms led to primary social relationships suffering (Chaney & Dew, 2003). Rather than establishing strong social ties with family and friends offline, many sexually compulsive MSM spend numerous hours online in search of the next “high.” Lee and Robbins (1995) explained that individuals who experience low social connectedness begin to fantasize about finding a place to belong. For many addicted MSM, this place is in cyberspace. Online, men can meet other men who share similar sexual interests, as well as men who require anonymous sexual encounters.

Transient sexual relationships established online provide further evidence that many compulsive MSM are likely to experience low social connectedness. Some man-for-man relationships established online are one-time sexual encounters, resulting in feelings of shame, guilt, and loneliness, causing many MSM to further isolate and withdraw from “real life” connections. Research has shown that men are more likely than women to have depreciated social connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 2000) and to lack the ability to allow interpersonal vulnerability (Miller, 1992). Online chat rooms allow sexually compulsive men to arrange offline sexual encounters, with the perception that they have not put themselves in an emotionally vulnerable situation. The encounter can be strictly sexual in nature, with no emotional risk-taking.

A final aspect of online sexual addiction that is likely to cause MSM to have decreased social connectedness is a potential history of childhood sexual trauma. Several authors have discussed the relationship between past childhood sexual abuse and sexual addiction in adulthood (Carnes, 1991; Carnes & Delmonico, 1996; Whitfield, 1998). Adulthood sexual compulsivity becomes a coping mechanism for previous victimization, as well as a format to reenact the childhood trauma. Some MSM who have experienced

childhood sexual abuse may engage in online sexual behavior as a way to escape the negative affect associated with the abuse. In relation to social connectedness, some MSM who have experienced childhood trauma may not get involved in trusting relationships or allow themselves to become emotionally attached to others. In one study, youth who had been sexually abused perceived themselves as less socially connected (Rew, 2002). These results potentially link social connectedness to online sexual addiction, via previous childhood trauma, albeit empirical research exploring the relationship between social connectedness and online sexually addicted MSM is needed. Research exploring the possibility that addicted MSM experience greater levels of dissociation when online as a response to past childhood trauma also is needed.

ONLINE DISSOCIATION

Disturbances in consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of one's environment comprise the essential features of dissociation (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Bernstein and Putnam (1986) defined dissociation as an inability to integrate one's thoughts, feelings, or experiences into present consciousness. Experiences of dissociation have been conceptualized along a continuum (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986; Holtgraves & Stockdale, 1997; Waller, Putnam, & Carlson, 1996). At one end of the continuum are non-pathological forms of dissociation, such as daydreaming and fantasizing. At the other end are more severe forms of dissociation, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder. Dissociation is generally described as an uncommon phenomenon; however, use of the Internet to express sexual behavior may possibly increase the likelihood of dissociative experiences among sexually compulsive MSM. Previous childhood trauma may help to explain online dissociation as it is experienced by some sexually addicted MSM.

In recent years there has been greater focus on the relationship between adult sexual compulsivity and dissociation as a response to previous childhood sexual and/or physical abuse. The literature documents childhood trauma as a causative factor in the development of sexually compulsive behaviors, fantasy, and dissociation in men and women (Briere, 1994; Carnes, 1991; Carnes & Delmonico, 1996, van der Kolk, 1989). Males who have experienced previous childhood trauma are more prone to be preoccupied with sex, engage in higher rates of sexual behavior, and are more likely to dissociate than males who have not experienced childhood trauma (Briere & Runtz, 1990a; Briere, Smiljanich, & Henschel, 1992; Griffin-Shelley, Benjamin, & Benjamin, 1995). In addition, men who have been abused are more likely to engage in sexually compulsive behavior in adulthood as a re-enactment of the previous trauma than men who have not been abused. For many men, the actual experience of the re-enactment is part of the dissociative phenomenon. Dissociation occurs when an individual is unaware not only

of why he is engaging in online sexual behavior but also of when the online sexual activity becomes compulsive. He has detached from his feelings and from reality, inducing social disconnection. He is attempting to come to terms with past abuse by controlling the present sexual experience, because as a child he was unable to control the sexual violation. He has lost himself in the fantasy and the virtual environment. Dissociation then serves as a way to manage affect associated with intrusive past trauma. This is supported by Brown's (2002) proposal that negative affect plays a role in cases of dissociation.

The relationship between sexually addictive behavior and dissociation has generally been established, however empirical research exploring the relationship among dissociation and Internet use is limited. Ofofu (2001) found that students who were Internet dependent experienced increased levels of dissociation. Chaney and Dew (2003) found MSM screened for sexual addiction described symptoms of dissociation while engaged in online sexual behavior. Some participants described a loss of reality, depicted as a loss of time and depersonalization, and experienced a fantasy component related to online sexual behavior. For example, it was not uncommon for participants to describe being disconnected from their thoughts, feelings, actions, and identity when imagining themselves in explicit scenes posted on pornographic web sites.

Dissociation also has been found to be related to boredom proneness. Cann and Harris (2003) found dissociation positively related to boredom proneness as related to one's ability to maintain focus on a task. It is possible that addicted MSM who access the Internet for sexual purposes become desensitized to the explicit material viewed or the sexualized cyber-chats in which engaged. The lack of online stimulation may foster sexually compulsive MSM to dissociate as a way to increase the intensity of the online sexual behavior.

The Internet has been hypothesized to attract men who experience dissociation (Suler & Phillips, 1997). For example, many Internet service providers allow individuals to create multiple "screen names," potentially allowing MSM to act appropriately under one online identity, but behave compulsively under another online identity. Most men are likely to be aware of their online behavior, but for some MSM who have experienced abuse or who are prone to dissociation, or both, the Internet's capacity to create multiple online identities may heighten the risk of online dissociation. Some researchers may argue that detaching from reality when online is no different than the experience of imagining when reading a book. However, many sexually addicted MSM engage in behaviors online that they might not otherwise engage. Furthermore, many of these behaviors result in severe negative consequences that the person is unable to identify how the consequences came to be. The drive to act out sexually becomes so intense, the compulsion itself becomes dissociative. For example, an addicted MSM might access the

Internet to check his e-mail, but find himself in a chat room without any recollection of how he got into the chat room; a type of online dissociative fugue.

Additional evidence of MSM's online dissociative experiences can be observed when individuals engage in cybersex. Carnes, Delmonico, and Griffin (2001) discuss the power of cybersex as potent because "it's one step removed from reality" (p. 35). However, it is possible among many MSM; cybersex becomes a temporary, total removal from reality. A sexually compulsive man may lose all sense of reality while engaged in cybersex. He may create a persona and lose his real identity in place of the fantasy persona. A man might fantasize about being a prisoner and being forced to engage in sexual activity with the prison guard (it is common for MSM who have been abused to re-enact trauma through relationships exhibiting power differentials). In a chat room he may seek another man to portray the guard. They engage in cybersex and the man becomes so entranced in the cybersex role-play that he loses his sense of self, time, and location. Afterwards, he may feel shame and guilt and wonder where the time had gone. Similarly, explicit web sites might foster dissociation among addicted MSM.

It is not uncommon for addicted MSM to view web sites that show nude men engaged in "hardcore" sexual activities. Some compulsive males may masturbate while viewing these explicit sites. Explicit web sites potentially trigger an individual to dissociate. This might occur when a man places himself in the scene to which he is masturbating. Beyond fantasizing, many online sexually addicted MSM depersonalize and lose all sense of reality. In that moment, he takes himself out of "real-life" and places himself in the scene. He may begin to objectify himself and others. Exploring explicit web sites becomes more exciting than exploring reality. This allows him to spend hours online, in a state of online dissociation. Some sexually addicted MSM may use web sites to re-enact previous childhood trauma, further causing an individual to be prone to dissociate. This might be done by searching for sites that display images that are similar to how the male experienced past abuse.

More information is needed that explores the Internet's role in providing a virtual space for sexually compulsive MSM to dissociate. To date, no quantitative studies have been conducted that explore dissociative experiences among Internet sex addicts. If a continuum of dissociation exists, it is possible that online dissociation fits somewhere along the spectrum.

DISCUSSION

Sexually addicted MSM who have a poor sense of social connectedness may be more likely to isolate themselves compared to addicted MSM who have stronger social ties. As a result, they may spend more time at home engaged in solitary behaviors and may be more likely to experience a high frequency of boredom. Feelings of boredom may be magnified, when

additional feelings of loneliness and depression are experienced. In order to escape negative affect, such as loneliness, sadness, and boredom, the Internet might be accessed for sexual purposes. Once online, some MSM may explore the various sexual aspects of the Internet. Sexual components of the Internet potentially trigger memories of past childhood sexual abuse for some sexually addicted men. As an attempt to control the negative feelings associated with previous abuse, they might experience symptoms of dissociation or unconsciously re-enact the trauma by viewing sexually explicit web sites, engaging in cybersex, or arranging offline sexual encounters. A cycle is established when after expressing sexually addictive behavior online, feelings of guilt and shame cause him to withdraw and isolate further, reinforcing low social connectedness. Potentially after each addictive cycle he may socially disconnect further, experience a greater intensity of boredom, and become increasingly disorganized and dissociative.

Implications for Helping Professionals

The conceptualizations in this article have important implications for helping professionals who work with MSM who are sexually compulsive online. It is crucial for professionals to assess how the client is using the Internet for sexual purposes and how much time is spent engaged in online sexual activity. It is important for professionals not to automatically assume a MSM is sexually compulsive just because sexuality has been expressed via the Internet. There are a few reliable measures of general sexual addiction that can be utilized to accurately assess whether one is addicted (Carnes & Weiss, 2002; Coleman, Miner, Ohlerking, & Raymond, 2001; Kalichman & Rompa, 1995). For MSM who are Internet sexually addicted, the professional will want to explore with the client how and when boredom is normally experienced. Patterns of when boredom is experienced will need to be identified in order to implement boredom prevention strategies. The professional will want to assess how the client has attempted to alleviate boredom in the past, particularly as it relates to Internet sexual behavior. Treatment specialists will want to help the addicted MSM make the connection between when and if he is sexually acting-out online during times of boredom.

Since social connectedness is a subjective experience, the therapist will want to explore with the sexually addicted MSM how he views social connectedness. An assessment of one's social network will need to take place. Exploring with the client how his compulsive online sexual activity has contributed to feelings of social disconnectedness also must take place. Additionally, professionals need to examine whether the addicted MSM client has been sexually acting-out online as an attempt to become more socially connected in cyberspace and via chat rooms.

Lastly, helping professionals will want to explore whether or not previous childhood trauma has been experienced. This is generally part of

most mental health intakes. Furthermore, professionals will need to examine whether or not dissociative symptoms are present while using the Internet for sexual purposes and when the client is offline. There are several valid and reliable measures to accurately diagnose experiences of dissociation (Briere & Runtz, 1989; Briere & Runtz, 1990b; Cann & Harris, 2003). Treatment of dissociation is beyond the scope of this paper, however, helping professionals need to start assessing for dissociative symptoms among online sexually addicted MSM.

Increasingly, many MSM are utilizing the Internet as a forum to express sexually compulsive behavior. Psychosocial constructs that maintain Internet sexual addiction among this population are not well documented. Therefore, the concepts of boredom proneness, social connectedness, and dissociation were conceptualized as potential factors that facilitate and maintain online sexual addiction among a stigmatized population. Further empirical research is needed to explore the psychosocial variables of sexually addicted MSM who utilize the Internet, in order for effective treatment strategies to be established.

Implications for Future Research

Although limited, empirical research exploring the psychosocial constructs associated with individuals who engage in extreme Internet sexual activity are increasing. Empirical research exploring psychosocial variables among MSM are even more limited. The content herein generates several questions for empirical inquiry. Future research might want to answer the following questions: Are MSM who are prone to boredom more likely to engage in extreme online sexual activity than individuals who are not prone to boredom? To what extent is boredom experienced by Internet sexually addicted MSM? Is there a relationship between tolerance, as delineated in addictions literature, and boredom proneness? Understanding the potential relationship between tolerance and boredom might result in interventions to block the progression of Internet sexual addiction.

Because social connections are often utilized in the treatment of sexual addiction, future research might focus on how MSM experience social connectedness. Among MSM, are there differences between feeling socially connected offline versus online? Are some MSM attempting to initially feel social connectedness by engaging in online sexual behavior, which then for many becomes unmanageable? Are MSM who feel socially connected more or less likely to engage in extreme online sexual activity than MSM who have no sense of social connectedness?

As previously mentioned dissociation has been described as a continuum (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986; Holtgraves & Stockdale, 1997). Where on the continuum is dissociation as experienced by some sexually addicted MSM? At what point does online dissociation become pathological as it

relates to sexual addiction? Finally, can Internet dissociation accurately be measured?

The above queries provide potential research questions for future exploration. When conducting research exploring sexual addiction among stigmatized populations, such as MSM, it is crucial that researchers take into account the sexual norms of the community in question. With the expected increase in the number MSM who access the Internet for sexual purposes, understanding the differences between unhealthy and “normal” Internet sexual behavior among MSM is necessary to effectively treat those struggling with sexual addiction.

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