

## Online Experiences of Sexually Compulsive Men Who Have Sex with Men

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*Online interviews were collected from 13 gay and bisexual men who access the Internet for sexual purposes. Participants were recruited from man-for-man Internet chat rooms and screened for sexual compulsivity using the Sexual Addiction Screening Test for Gay Men (G-SAST). Interviews were analyzed using qualitative methodology, specifically grounded theory. Among participants, compulsivity, denial, mood altering effects of online sexual behavior, online dissociation, and need for social connectedness emerged as common themes. The online sexual activities engaged in by men who have sex with men are discussed. Implications for future research and limitations of the study are provided.*

As the Internet continues to grow and the number of individuals accessing the Internet increases, it is likely that more individuals will engage in sexual behaviors. It has been reported that 200 sexually explicit web sites are added to the Internet daily (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000). Moreover, sex continues to be the most frequently searched term on the Internet (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; Putnam, 2000). It is reported that participation in some form of online sexual activity occurs among 20% of all Internet users, while 6–10% express concern about their online sexual behavior (Carnes, 2001; Cooper, Delmonico et al., 2000; Schneider, 2000).

Sexual addiction is described by the inability to inhibit sexual behavior despite negative consequences and also as an obsession with sexual activity (Schneider, 1991). Symptoms of sexual addiction include, loss of control, negative consequences experienced as a result of sexual behavior, increasing amounts of sexual activity needed to maintain sexual satisfaction, mood changes experienced around sexual activity, denial, and impaired daily functioning. An individual who is sexually addicted may spend as much as

The authors thank Dr. David Delmonico for sharing his expertise, which helped to strengthen the results of this study.

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15–25 hours online in a given week engaging in or seeking sexual activity (Cooper, Delmonico et al., 2000).

Sexually compulsive individuals are attracted to the Internet because of what has commonly been referred to as “The Triple A Engine” (Cooper, 1998). The Triple A Engine refers to the anonymity, accessibility, and affordability of the Internet. The anonymous nature of the Internet allows sexually compulsive individuals to act out their sexual addiction in secrecy. The easy access of the Internet allows for virtually anyone to log-on and begin surfing the web for sexually explicit material. In our technology-based culture, the Internet is easily accessed at home, work, school, cyber-cafes, and even via cell phones. The affordability component of The Triple A Engine refers to the inexpensive cost of acquiring an Internet Service Provider. For a few dollars per month an individual can access sexually based web sites on a home, work, or school computer. The anonymity, affordability, and accessibility make the Internet increasingly inviting for sexually addicted individuals, especially for those individuals whose sexual attraction is toward those of the same gender.

Due to the stigmatization associated with same gender sexual orientation, the Internet allows gay and bisexual males the opportunity to express their sexuality without fear of persecution. The number of lesbians and gay men who access the Internet is expected to reach 22.4 million by 2005 (Computer Economics, 2000). As lesbian and gay male Internet users increase, it is likely that helping professionals will see increasing numbers of sexual minority clients who are sexually addicted. At particular risk are men who have sex with men (MSM). Cooper, Delmonico et al. (2000) reported that gay males were more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to access the Internet for sexually related purposes. This is partly due to the Internet’s role of allowing gay males to become a normalized population online, which is contrary to their marginalized status offline (Cooper, McLoughlin et al., 2000). In order to enhance one’s understanding of the behaviors of sexually addicted MSM, it is crucial to explore further why this population utilizes the Internet for sexual purposes.

Dew and Chaney (in press) proposed information gathering, anonymity, self-medication and escape, less discrimination, and lack of social outlets as primary reasons why gay males use the Internet. Information gathered might include educational materials pertaining to gay men’s health, upcoming events within one’s gay community, and/or information about revealing one’s sexual orientation to others. In addition, individuals may feel that the anonymous nature of the Internet provides the perceived safety needed to explore one’s sexuality without fear of reprisal from significant others. For gay males who are attempting to alleviate negative affect, such as depression, fear, or loneliness, the Internet provides the means for a temporary escape. Another reason for gay males’ utilization of the Internet is because there is less focus on physical appearance in online interactions than in face-to-face communication (Cooper, McLoughlin et al., 2000). As a result,

gay males are likely to be less discriminating and less discriminated against in online venues versus traditional gay meeting places as it relates to physical appearance. Traditionally, gay bars have been the primary meeting place for MSM. However, the Internet is providing an additional outlet for social and sexual interaction.

Empirical studies exploring the role of the Internet among sexually addicted MSM are growing in number. Cooper, Delmonico et al. (2000) found gay and bisexual men more likely to be represented in a cybersex compulsive group than heterosexual males and females. Tikkanen and Ross (2000) found that gay men who utilize chat rooms were geographically isolated, young, in the process of coming out, and were not likely to identify themselves as gay. These chat room visitors also were more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behaviors, such as unprotected anal intercourse, and less likely to be tested for HIV (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002; Parsons, Bimbi, & Halkitis, 2001; Tikkanen & Ross, 2000). Moreover, gay men who access the Internet to set up face-to-face sexual encounters reported higher use of nitrate inhalants and methamphetamines in combination with Viagra to increase sexual intensity than gay men who do not use the Internet for sexual purposes (Benotsch et al., 2002).

Several empirical studies explored sexual addiction and the Internet among gay males in relation to HIV prevention. Benotsch et al. (2002) explored the prevalence of meeting sex partners over the Internet and behavioral characteristics of MSM who reported meeting a partner online. Of their sample, 34% of participants reported having had sex with someone they first met online. Furthermore, they found participants who had met sex partners over the Internet possessed good knowledge of AIDS and HIV transmission. Among sexually compulsive, gay/bisexual, male escorts who advertise over the Internet, levels of sensation seeking and problems with self-confidence were associated with greater risk of HIV infection and HIV reinfection (for individuals already infected with HIV) (Parsons et al., 2001). Furthermore, as the number of online sex partners increased, the level of unprotected sex practices also increased among MSM (Hospers, Harterink, Van Den Hoek, & Veenstra, 2002).

Although these studies have contributed greatly to the understanding of sexually compulsive behaviors among MSM, there exists no qualitative examination of this community's online experiences, attitudes, and emotions. As a result, the purpose of this study was to explore not only the sexual behaviors of users, but also provide a more complete depiction of the affective and cognitive processes associated with online compulsive sexual behavior. Results from interviews also were utilized to assess for additional themes related to sexual compulsive behaviors not already mentioned in previous conceptual inquiries. Online interviews were used because previous research indicates that online research participants are more likely to give honest responses due to decreased social anxiety, insured anonymity, and a minimized need

to reply in a socially desirable manner (Epstein & Klinkenberg, 2002; Joinson, 1999).

## METHOD

### Participants

The study sample consisted of 13 online volunteers, ranging in age from 20 to 55 years ( $M = 35.9$ ). The sample was comprised of 12 European-Americans and one biracial individual (European/Asian-American). Eleven participants self-identified as gay and two men self-identified as bisexual. Relationship status was as follows: eight participants were single, three partnered to other men ( $M = 12$  years), one individual dated a female, and one man was married to a female (22 years). Participants were recruited from various man-for-man chat rooms, representing diverse geographic locations within the United States, including Arizona, California, Georgia, Indiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Of the participants, two earned high school diplomas, four reported attending some college, five completed undergraduate degrees, one finished a Masters degree, and one earned a Ph.D. All individuals were employed at the time of the online interview. The number of hours spent online engaged in sexual activity or seeking sexual partners for offline meetings in a given week, ranged from 1 to 40 hours ( $M = 13.6$ ). Twelve participants reported a negative HIV status and one individual reported that his HIV status was unknown due to no previous HIV testing. The date of last HIV testing ranged from two months to eight years ( $M = 13.7$  months). Table 1 illustrates participants' characteristics including, age, location, G-SAST score, number of hours reported online engaged in or seeking sexual activity, and relationship status. Furthermore, participants are listed in the table in the order that they are introduced in this article. Lastly, Institutional Review Board approval was granted, and all respondents were informed of the risks and benefits of participating in this study.

### Measures

Participants were screened for sexual compulsivity using the Sexual Addiction Screening Test for Gay Men (G-SAST) (Carnes & Weiss, 2002). Participants' scores ranged from 4 to 17 ( $M = 12.1$ ). The G-SAST, a 25-item preliminary assessment tool specifically designed for MSM, includes characteristic responses that frequently identify men who have difficulty managing their sexual impulses. Examples of questions include the following: (a) Do you often find yourself preoccupied with sexual thoughts?; (b) Has your use of phone sex lines, computer sex lines, etc. exceeded your ability to pay for these service?; (c) Has sex been a way for you to escape your problems?; and (d) Have you engaged in unsafe or "risky" sexual practices even though you knew it could cause you harm?

**TABLE 1.** Participant Descriptions

Interviewee	Age	Location	G-SAST	Hours online	Relationship	Disclosure of sexual orientation
P-1	38	Boston, MA	15	40	Single	Disclosed to friends and "some family"
P-2	35	Pittsburgh, PA	16	14	Partnered to a male (13 years)	Disclosed to friends, family, and some coworkers
P-3	25	St. Louis, MO	9	15	Dating a female	Has not disclosed bisexuality
P-4	32	Gary, IN	17	29	Partnered to a male (3 years)	Disclosed to brother and father only.
P-5	39	Laguna Niguel, CA	9	9	Single	"No one else knows" Disclosed to one heterosexual friend, but not to family
P-6	40	Scituate, MA	4	4	Single	Identified as, "Very out"
P-7	20	Nashville, TN	12	5	Single	"Out to all, but family"
P-8	55	Tucson, AZ	7	7	Married to female (22 years)	Disclosed bisexuality to some friends
P-9	20	Cleveland, OH	16	1	Single	Disclosed to family, friends, coworkers
P-10	31	Los Angeles, CA	17	4	Single	"Out to friends. Mom and sister know, but do not discuss"
P-11	27	Columbus, GA	5	5	Single	Disclosed to significant others
P-12	54	Atlanta, GA	16	16	Single	Disclosed to friends, but not family
P-13	51	St. Louis, MO	14	14	Partnered to a male (20 years)	Disclosed to friends, but not family

The answer format is forced choice (yes or no). One to three “yes” answers characterize individuals who might need to be concerned about their sexual behavior. Individuals who responded with four to six “yes” answers signify a potential need for professional help related to managing compulsive sexual behaviors. Six or more “yes” responses characterize individuals who have a problem with self-abusive or dangerous consequences as a result of their sexual activities and should seek treatment for sexual addiction (Carnes & Weiss, 2002). The G-SAST was developed as a casual instrument to elicit personal information for assessment and conversation pertaining to the compulsive sexual behavior of MSM (R. Weiss, personal communication, March 9, 2003).

*Primary Interviews:* Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit information regarding how MSM describe their online sexual experiences. Open-ended interview questions allowed participants to illustrate their online experiences. Two sets of interview questions were created. The initial interview questions were utilized with the first ten participants to generate primary codes and themes. The first questions were created to gain clarity on how MSM use the Internet for sexual purposes. For example, participants were asked the following questions: (a) How have you used the Internet for sexual purposes; (b) Tell me about the times you find yourself using the Internet for sexual purposes; (c) What is it like for you when you are in a chat room, viewing an explicit site, or engaged in some other form of online sexual activity?; (d) How has your online activity affected significant others or yourself?; and (e) How connected do you feel to people you interact with online?

*Secondary Interviews:* Once themes were differentiated, interview questions were revised and a second set of semi-structured, open-ended questions were developed and implemented to confirm or disconfirm four primary domains: denial, compulsiveness, mood-altering affects of the Internet, and need for social belonging. The revised questions were administered to three final interviewees. Examples of revised interview questions included: (a) What are your expectations when you go online?; (b) What things affect you when you are in a chat room seeking a sex partner or engaged in some other form of online sexual activity?; (c) What other things would you be doing if you were online seeking a sex partner?; (d) How connected do you feel to the people in your life?; and (e) Tell me about a time when you were in a chat room when people presented themselves inaccurately. Interviews lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and were conducted between 4:30 p.m. and 1:30 a.m. E.S.T.

## Design and Procedure

The screen name “PhDSexResearch,” was established through a major Internet Service Provider. Next, a web site was created that included the informed consent form and the G-SAST. A profile for the screen name also was created

that explained the purpose of the study and included a link to the informed consent page and G-SAST. The primary researcher entered chat rooms and waited for volunteers to instant message (IM) the interviewer. IMs are an online dialogue box that can only be viewed by the sender and receiver (i.e., interviewer and interviewee). Room members were able to see that the researcher was in the chat room and visitors could read the profile by “clicking” on the interviewer’s screen name. Once an IM was received, volunteers were greeted, notified of the research purpose, reminded that participation was voluntary, and informed that any information collected would remain confidential. Participants first completed the G-SAST and then self-reported the number of questions to which they had answered “yes.” Interviews were then conducted via IMs with participants who answered yes to four or more G-SAST items. Participants were encouraged to elaborate and to be as descriptive as possible when answering questions. Interviewees were asked if follow-up interviews could be conducted via email for clarification and elaboration of initial data collected. All interviewees agreed to follow-up emails. Completed interviews were saved into Microsoft Word for analysis.

The principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used to analyze the interviews. Grounded theory is a methodological protocol for developing theory based on data that is systematically gathered and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The constant comparative method was utilized to collect, analyze, and compare data, while constantly recycling through the methodological stages. Online interviews were put through a process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding involved separating collected data and exploring sentences and paragraphs for differences and similarities among interviewees. The primary researcher read through all interviews, highlighted and kept notes of participants’ online activities (i.e., chat rooms, viewing explicit sites, cybersex, etc.) and online experiential themes. Interviews were then subjected to a second round of coding termed axial coding. Specifically, online experiences of interviewees were analyzed and connected to specific conditions or online experiences discussed in the interviews. This process allowed for the generation of common categorical themes among interviewees’ Internet experiences. During this stage, the secondary researcher separately coded the first ten interviews, noting categorical themes. Both researchers then compared similarities and dissimilarities among themes for the purpose of inter-rater reliability.

The last phase of the coding process, called selective coding, involved the identification of several core domains under which all the emerging themes could be listed as subcategories. Both researchers consulted over several meetings to accomplish this classification of themes. Once themes and subthemes had emerged, the primary researcher went back online and interviewed three new participants. This form of member-checking allowed the researchers to use input from participants to confirm or disconfirm the

research findings. In addition, member-checking allowed for the enhancement of research credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The final three interview transcripts were coded and compared to the previous findings.

To amplify validity and reliability, data sources were triangulated. Triangulation, the utilization of multiple data sources, allows findings to be more dependable (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, when findings are confirmed by using more than one apparatus to measure the same construct, validity is enhanced. Researcher notes, interview transcripts, the G-SAST, and consultation with experts in the field, were the primary data sources used that allowed for recycling of the analytical process. An expert, in the area of sexual addiction assessment, treatment, and research was consulted once final themes and subthemes emerged. This process of peer debriefing enhanced this study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose of consulting with an expert was to confirm or disconfirm the current findings based on his clinical and research experience with this population.

## RESULTS

Interviewees reported engaging in a variety of online sexual activities. Of the participants, all 13 men acknowledged using the Internet for the purpose of arranging offline face-to-face sexual encounters. A large majority ( $n = 11$ ) of participants utilized explicit web sties as a masturbatory tool by downloading or trading sex-related photographs, videos, and stories. Over half of the respondents ( $n = 7$ ) engaged in cybersex, typing and receiving sexually explicit text with another online person usually resulting in ejaculation. Online classifieds for meeting other men for erotic massages and other sexual interactions were accessed by nearly half of the interviewees ( $n = 6$ ). Explicit web sites with the capacity for net meetings/web cameras ( $n = 4$ ) and exchanging sexually explicit telephone conversations from someone met online ( $n = 2$ ) also were reported.

Information related to how MSM perceive their online sexual attitudes, experiences, and emotions also was gathered. Specifically, five categories were identified, under which all other themes could be placed. Some themes fit under more than one domain. Compulsiveness, denial, mood-altering affects of online sexual behavior, online dissociation, and the need for social connections emerged as primary domains.

### Compulsiveness

Congruent with any addictive disorder, one of the most observable themes associated with participants' compulsive online sexual behavior was loss of control. Two subthemes emerged under this primary theme of compulsiveness. The first subtheme was the participants' inability to completely stop

their online sexual behavior or minimize the time and energy devoted to Internet activity. The majority of participants acknowledged at least one attempt to stop engaging in online sexual behaviors. As stated by P-1, "It's a cycle . . . I'll lose interest and stay off the computer but then I want sex and start again. I do not think I can really control the need for sex, hence the cycles." For many respondents, the accessibility of the Internet was a constant trigger for resuming compulsive behaviors whether at home, work, or at school. Other participants cited an inability to curb their online sexual behaviors such as in P-2's description of his inability to cut back his online activity, "Its like any addiction, it only works for a little bit and then reality sets into place. I am on my own and probably don't trust myself in regards to saying no." In addition, an attempt to discontinue or reduce online sexual activity often produced consistent withdrawal symptoms, typified by a strong sexual arousal and a need to engage in sexual activity. P-3 acknowledged that cutting back his online access frequently caused him to be "anxious and aroused," therefore leading him to "get online to find someone to fuck." Other withdrawal symptoms included mild depression, nervousness, social isolation, and low energy.

A second subtheme of compulsiveness was the compelling need or desire to engage in repetitive and habitual online behaviors. Nearly all of the participants exhibited a combination of preferred sexual activities that were arranged in a ritualized manner. Certain times of the day, especially in the evenings, were noted by P-4, "I get online at night mostly out of habit. I do it so much it is automatic, even compulsive." Other respondents acknowledged similar online behaviors that consisted of visiting chat rooms, engaging in instant messaging, exchanging personal information, conversing via telephone, arranging a place to meet, and returning to one's home or hotel for anonymous sex. A respondent, P-5, described his obsession for sexual activity as "I was so horny, so I went online. Finding sex becomes a mission. Its like an itch that needs to be scratched, but you can't reach it by yourself. So you look for someone to scratch your itch." P-3 also characterized this compulsion by stating, "I have no control over what I am doing. I feel like I can't leave the computer until I climax, but I don't want to be that guy on the net jacking off because it's not cool."

## Denial

Participants in the current study perceived that their compulsive online sexual behavior had no significant effect on themselves or on the lives of their significant others. This form of denial, characterized by minimizing, ignoring, justifying, and rationalizing emerged among all participants. Furthermore, respondents reported less stigma attached to their online anonymous hookups than traditional face-to-face meetings such as in bars or sex clubs. For example, P-6 stated, "my online activity has [not] had any affect on me. If anything,

since I don't do the bars much anymore, my days of tricking often when I went out are over. The occasional online hook-up doesn't seem so slutty." Even though P-7 thought his sexual compulsivity might have some effect on his life, denial helped him to minimize and rationalize the consequences of his online sexual activity. He states:

I have been dating a lot less than I did in high school . . . I am not sure if my online activity is the source of it. I am more non-committal, but I think that the online activity is more of a manifestation of that than a cause.

Particularly concerning was the unwillingness or inability of participants to acknowledge the effect of their online activity on significant others. When asked how his sexual compulsivity influenced his relationship with his wife, P-8 reported, "It [online sexual behavior] hasn't at all. I won't let that happen. I have a good life and my online life is just to pass time anyway. My wife would answer in the same way." When addressing his bisexuality, he responded, "It's almost like living two lives, except one is dormant and the other is aggressive and happy. I refuse to let that part of my life interfere with my other life which is happy and very much adjusted." Other respondents rationalize their online behavior as beneficial to others. For example, P-11 stated, "My online sexual activity has not affected anyone in a bad way. I help people by meeting them online." In addition participants minimized any negative consequences associated with these anonymous sexual encounters. In his interview, P-3 denied the impact of his bisexual online experiences on his girlfriend by stating, "It hasn't affected me at all. It's just a way for me to jack off. It just hasn't been as serious with my girlfriend probably. I just keep out relationship dating, nothing serious."

### Mood-Altering Effects

The mood altering effects of compulsive online sexual behavior refers to interviewees' perceptions that emotional changes within themselves were a result of online sexual activity. Each participant involved in this study mentioned alterations in mood as a consequence of their Internet usage. Respondents reported perceived abbreviated increases in self-esteem, in particular enhanced feelings of worth associated with receiving attention from others, and self-medicating effects of online sexual behavior. Due to the anonymity provided by the Internet and less emphasis placed on a person's physical attributes when compared to face-to-face meetings, older gay males in this study enhanced their self-worth by having sex with younger gay or bisexual males. P-5 acknowledged, "after hooking up with someone I met online, I felt pretty damn good. Let's face it; it's an ego boost. In the gay community being almost 40 is considered really old." Younger participants, such as P-9, acknowledged his excitement from being in a chat room, "I feel like my heart is pacing faster. I feel like everyone is noticing me. It just makes me feel good

about myself.” In addition to a brief increase in self-esteem, Internet sexual activity provided a temporary alleviation of negative affect for the majority of respondents. Feelings of boredom, loneliness, and stress were acknowledged by several individuals as a trigger to engaging in online activity. For example, P-2 stated, “before I go online I feel lonely, bored, and probably stress from work. I feel a need for self-gratification by masturbation or visual stimulation. Afterwards, I feel relieved and stress [free].”

A subtheme that emerged under the domain of mood-altering effects of online sexual behavior was the involvement of participants’ expectations as a factor impacting one’s mood. Participants reported more positive mood changes when their expectations were met. Negative emotions were reported when their expectations were not met. Participants’ expectations were based on the age, physical attractiveness, personality, sexual outcome of offline interaction, and relationship potential of individuals initially met online, but that led to offline sexual encounters. In describing how his expectations were related to the individuals he meets for offline sex, P-5 reported, “generally, I feel good. However, if a guy fails to live up to my expectations, I feel crappy about wasting time. When all goes well, the guy and I have smiles on our faces afterwards.” Another participant, P-7, describes how his expectations were related to the individuals he meets for offline sex: “it depends on how well the experience went for me. If it went well, I am usually in a great mood. If it did not, I either am frustrated or disgusted if the guy ends up not being what I expected.”

### Online Dissociation

Online dissociation refers to mentally and emotionally detaching while engaged in online sexual activity. Almost all participants reported experiencing some form of dissociation while engaged in sexual behavior on the Internet or during offline sexual encounters. Two subthemes emerged based on the interviewees’ accounts of online sexual activity. First, online dissociation experienced by respondents was manifested by loss of reality. Participants’ loss of reality was depicted as a loss of time and depersonalization. For the purposes of this study, depersonalization refers to participants’ losing a sense of self-identity via objectification of self and others. Objectification of self and others emerged when participants experienced lack of connection with their feelings and actions, toward themselves and others, while engaged in sexual behavior online or Internet activity that resulted in offline interaction. P-12 described how he lost a sense of time when engaged in online sexual behaviors, “when I am in chat rooms, I forget time and troubles. I have to set a timer not to stay on too long.” P-7 characterized depersonalization and objectification of self: “sometimes I feel like I am just going through the motions of looking for porn. I imagine myself in one of the roles on a porn site. In the chat room I feel, to steal a cliché, like a piece of meat . . . it’s all about

selling yourself.” P-4 admits to similar objectification while stating, “I don’t feel connected to them [(individuals from online)] at all . . . just objects. They don’t seem real. Just a game . . . all games.” P-13 illustrates objectification by discussing his use of chat rooms to meet men offline, “I was looking for someone to top me. I wanted to be fucked face-down and I felt like I needed to be used, to be held down and rough fucked. I needed to feel that.” P-10 further describes how he depersonalizes a man he met offline for a sexual encounter, “When I was with him, I felt a sense of detachment. He became an object. I was probably making a grocery list while in the middle of it [sex].”

A second subtheme that emerged is that of online dissociation as expressed by the fantasy associated with online sexual behavior. Participants described lack of connection to their thoughts, feelings, actions, and identity when either engaged in online sexuality or viewing sexually explicit web sites. Fantasy components included participants imagining themselves in scenes when viewing explicit web sites and perceived excitement associated with the unknown as indicated by P-7 sharing that, “the longing is comparable to more than just wanting to hook-up with someone . . . but actually having the coach/athlete [fantasy] scene. P-3, in stating his sexual preference towards transsexuals or drag queens, acknowledges “When I am online I am finding someone to fuck . . . I like the idea of [a] hot chick fucking me.” Participants perceived that online sexual activities were more exciting than “real life,” allowing participants to spend more time engaged in online sexual activity. P-3 revealed, “I always feel like I am going to be found out and that is exciting. I love the rush of it.” P-4 stated, “There is more excitement this way. My partner and friends are boring to me. What’s exciting is not knowing who you could meet. It’s like opening a gift on Christmas, a guy could be really nice and really hot or he could kill you.” This factor is exacerbated by the anonymity associated with online sexual activity, thereby allowing for a fantasy to be created without the reality of a person’s physique or perceived attractiveness.

### Need for Social Connections

A final theme that emerged from online interviews was the participants’ need for social connections and a sense of belonging. The purpose of socially connecting for the interviewees was to experience friendship, love, and intimacy. Lack of social connections and feelings of not belonging emerged among most participants, which enhanced feelings of loneliness. P-2 revealed, “I used to feel connected to people in my life, until I decided to withdraw. I find myself more cautious in giving out of myself to others.” The majority of participants self-identified as being “loners,” “detached,” and “isolated.” These interviewees acknowledged being increasingly disconnected from family members, the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community, and friends. Most participants had not disclosed their sexual orientation to their

parents or other family members, nor did they have intentions of doing so. The majority of interviewees shared P-5's disclosure of "[not] belonging to any social groups" including gay and bisexual organizations. Furthermore, P-5 identified his sense of not belonging to either the gay or bisexual community when stating "being a part of the straight community for so many years, it is like being home. In the gay community, I have very little experience . . . so I am much less comfortable." Several participants reported "pulling away" from friends, although denying that their online activities influenced this behavior. This expanded sense of isolation enhanced the need to have social connection and a sense of belonging.

## DISCUSSION

Results from previous research have determined that gay males use the Internet to engage in sexually compulsive activities at higher rates than heterosexual males and females (Cooper, Delmonico et al., 2000). Researchers, however, have not examined how sexually compulsive MSM perceive these online behaviors and experiences. Sexually compulsive MSM use the Internet to engage in a variety of sexual behaviors (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002; Parsons, Bimbi, & Halkitis, 2001). Results from this study support this statement, as all participants had engaged in face-to-face sexual interactions with another person resulting from online activity. Furthermore, the majority of respondents participated in a variety of other sexual behaviors, including conducting cybersex, downloading sex-related photographs, and accessing online classifieds. In addition to describing their online sexual activities, results from this research provide insight into the thoughts and emotions that accompany these addictive behaviors.

The compulsivity associated with online sexual behavior was clearly evident, as exemplified by the persistent need to engage in sexual behavior, unsuccessful attempts to reduce or stop behavior, repetitiveness of the behavior, and loss of control. Although most participants were aware of their compulsive online sexual behavior, not one respondent acknowledged being troubled over his actions. The anonymity and accessibility of online sexual activity may have contributed to this high level of denial, given that this behavior is usually performed in private and easily available to the sexually compulsive gay male. It is more "safe" and convenient to arrange a face-to-face sexual encounter from one's home or office via the computer than risk being seen visiting a gay social establishment. As a result, negative consequences associated with engaging in face-to-face sexual interactions are often minimized, possibly influencing greater sexual activity while sustaining high levels of denial.

Most individuals in the midst of active addiction are in significant denial related to their behavior and its effect on self and others. Minimizing, ignoring, and rationalizing are common examples of how denial is supported

and the compulsive behavior is maintained. Results from this research consistently found denial to be a significant component of online sexual compulsivity. Not a single participant identified their online sexual activity as problematic, even though a majority of respondents acknowledged negative implications on a marriage, dating relationship, family members, and friends. Although engaging in at-risk sexual behaviors, no participant acknowledged putting himself and others in danger. Participants reported spending significant time engaged in online activities, yet failed to acknowledge how this time could have been spent in more beneficial ways.

Individuals begin gambling, drinking, or experimenting with drugs not for the purpose of getting addicted to the behavior but rather for the experimentation, excitement, or curiosity associated with a particular behavior or substance. The same may be said for the MSM Internet users. Online activity for MSM may initially be a safe haven to explore one's sexuality, obtain information on gay resources, and dialogue with other MSM. Sexual experimentation may even result from this online activity. However, the majority of participants in this study report having lost a sense of control, including the loss of reality associated with their online activity. Most respondents prefer to meet others via the Internet compared to more traditional avenues of meeting others such as friends, parties, or at a bar. A lack of confidence associated with one's social skills, perceived attractiveness of self, and unresolved sexual identity issues, although not addressed in this study, may be important elements affecting why individuals choose the Internet as the primary means of meeting others.

Results of the study should be viewed within the context of methodological limitations. First, although efforts were made to gain a geographically diverse sample, all participants were accessed via paid Internet service provider's chat rooms. It is possible that results would have been different if the sample had been obtained from existing free chat room services, compared to an Internet service provider that costs \$23.99 per month. Consequently, it is possible that the sample was more highly educated, earned greater incomes, and was less ethnically diverse as a result of the sampling procedures. Another limitation to the generalizability of these results is that this sample included only participants who volunteered to (a) contact the primary researcher via IM; (b) complete the G-SAST; (c) share his G-SAST results; and (d) engage in a 30–50 minute online interview examining online sexual behaviors and attitudes. The online sexual activity and perception of these behaviors of this self-motivated sample may not be identical to those individuals who were not willing to share their Internet sexual history. Furthermore, although research has indicated that online research participants are more likely to provide honest responses than in more traditional data collection methods, obtaining responses via instant messaging could have reduced the amount of information provided by the interviewee, as compared to disclosures made in face-to-face interviewing.

Issues of reliability associated with Internet research must be noted. The survey participants, already prone to engaging in dissociative behaviors, may have represented a fantasy persona rather than a true identity, which allows respondents to remain detached from those with whom they are interacting (Carnes, Delmonico, & Griffin, 2001). Although minimized due to the anonymity associated with non face-to-face interviewing, respondents may have wanted to appear as either less or more sexually active as a result of being interviewed. In addition, the emotional state of the respondent prior to completing the online survey was not assessed, thereby potentially impacting the reliability of the results.

A final limitation of the study may be regarding the use of the G-SAST as an assessment instrument. Although widely used by sexual addiction treatment facilities, mental health professionals, and web sites devoted to the education and treatment of sexually compulsive behaviors, including The National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity's (n.d.) online site, as a preliminary screening instrument, the G-SAST has not been used in previous quantitative research. Consequently, no reliability or validity information is available. However, because of its widespread professional use, the G-SAST was selected as the identifiable measure of online sexual compulsivity among MSM.

Future research of online sexual behaviors and attitudes of sexually compulsive MSM is needed to delineate affective and situational factors that influence at-risk behaviors. An examination of social support, perceived attractiveness, and sexual identity issues of sexually compulsive MSM who use the Internet would provide useful information regarding why individuals may choose the Internet as a primary means of meeting sexual partners. Also, replicating this study with users of free Internet chat-rooms would be beneficial in gaining a more representative sample, including economic, ethnic, and educational differences. Future qualitative research is needed to examine individuals who are in recovery from online sexual addiction. Discovering events that influenced a person to stop or curb one's online sexual behavior would be useful information. Finally, assessment of the knowledge and awareness of online sexual behavior among mental health professionals is needed to determine educational needs.

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