Abstinence or Acceptance? A Case Series of Men's Experiences With an Intervention Addressing Self-Perceived Problematic Pornography Use

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CASE REPORT

Abstinence or Acceptance? A Case Series of Men's Experiences With an Intervention Addressing Self-Perceived Problematic Pornography Use

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ABSTRACT

Self-perceived problematic pornography use (SPPPU) has recently become an important area for sexual addiction and compulsivity research. Heterosexual men with SPPPU report a lack of supportive or available treatment options. In this article, we report on six cases of men with SPPPU as they underwent a mindfulness-based intervention program. The aim of the article is to offer greater insights into the men's individual, subjective, and reflective experiences during the intervention. The study applied a mixed research methodology that utilized interviews, daily logging spreadsheets, diaries, and prerecorded guided meditations. Results suggest that intervention design and setting can significantly impact the efficacy of interventions aimed at addressing SPPPU, independent of the specific intervention utilized. Results suggest that self-acceptance and acceptance of pornography use may represent intervention goals that are more realistic, practical, and attainable than abstinence. Additional findings are discussed. This article contributes to filling a research gap related to identifying and discussing the various contextual aspects of what represents successful intervention processes and outcomes for men with SPPPU, as well as the challenges that men face as they work through SPPPU.

Introduction

Self-perceived problematic pornography use (SPPPU) has emerged as an important area of focus in sexual addiction and compulsivity research. SPPPU refers to the degree an individual self-identifies as having a problematic relationship with pornography, feels unable to control their use, and believes that their consumption of pornography negatively impacts on various domains of everyday life (Sniewski, Farvid & Carter, 2018). Men experience their pornography use as problematic for a variety of reasons. These include moral or ethical, social, and/or relational concerns, frequency or duration of use, consuming pornography in inappropriate contexts, or

consuming such content at the expense of other life responsibilities (Twohig & Crosby, 2010). While some literature has proposed quantified thresholds for problematic pornography use (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000; Kafka, 2010; Harper & Hodgins, 2016), frequency of consumption, in and of itself, is not a vital component or aspect of SPPPU (Sniewski et al., 2018). Indeed, research suggests that the core issues that most often predict men's self-definition and/or perception of problematic pornography use are the negative symptoms these men experience (Gola, Lewczuk, & Skorko, 2016).

Men with SPPPU believe they are unable to control, regulate, or manage their pornography use (Sniewski & Farvid, 2019) and have experienced numerous failed attempts at reducing their viewing or quitting pornography altogether (Kraus, Martino, & Potenza, 2016). Additionally, these men feel they do not have feasible treatment options; otherwise they would reach out for professional support (Ross, Månsson, & Daneback, 2012). Ironically, the secretive and private nature of the consumption that fuels SPPPU (Sniewski & Farvid, in press) highlights the importance of these men seeking help. Men who identify with SPPPU, however, face an additional challenge when considering options for help because doctors, therapists, and clinicians generally lack the training required for managing problematic pornography use (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). This lack of adequate training and knowledge exists despite clients regularly disclosing their pornography use in appointments and sessions (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). Without an adequate understanding of men's SPPPU, the possibility for unethical treatment increases, with therapists drawing on inadequate or personal biases and beliefs when attempting to help and intervene with the client's SPPPU (Ayres & Haddock, 2009).

Mindfulness has been identified as one potential intervention and/or tool that may be therapeutically helpful for those with SPPPU (Sniewski et al., 2018). Mindfulness has been conceptualized as the state attained when focusing one's attention on the present moment in a particular way (Chisholm & Gall, 2015), namely by acknowledging and accepting all of the thoughts, emotions, and physical body sensations occurring (Kuvaas, Dvorak, Pearson, Lamis, & Sargent, 2013). In relation to sexual compulsive behaviors such as SPPPU, mindfulness may play an important role in therapy and intervention because of its strong correlation with emotional instability (Kuvaas et al., 2013) and impulse control difficulties (Dvorak et al., 2014), both of which have been shown to be related to compulsive behaviors and consumptions. Indeed, mindfulness-based therapies have shown promise in addressing men's SPPPU (Twohig & Crosby, 2010; Sniewski et al., 2018), while Reid and colleagues found mindfulness to be a critical component for successfully treating those seeking help for hypersexual behavior (Reid, Bramen, Anderson, & Cohen, 2014).

In this article, we report on six cases of men with SPPPU as they participate in a mindfulness-based intervention in order to gain greater insights into the experiences of men as they intervene with SPPPU. This data is especially important since men with SPPPU do not commonly find their experiences of addressing and/or treating their problematic pornography use helpful (Kraus et al., 2016). While the primary focus of this article is on the general experiences of men as they progress through an intervention for SPPPU, some of the insights gathered in relation to mindfulness are reported here as well. Examining the effectiveness of the mindfulness-based intervention specifically utilized for this study, however, are not within the scope of this article. In order to achieve this study's intended purpose, short vignettes after the methods section are provided to help contextualize the men's experiences for the benefit of both clinicians and researchers. The vignettes are also used to illustrate the individual circumstances of why these men perceive their pornography use to be problematic, their experiences during the baseline period of the study in which the participant had not yet been provided the mindfulness-based intervention, and participant experiences at the conclusion of the study. Finally, the discussion section of the article explores the broader thematic interpretations shared by these men. This article contributes to identifying and discussing the various contextual aspects of what represents successful intervention processes and outcomes for men with SPPPU, as well as the challenges faced by these men and the researchers and clinicians working with this population.

Method

Participants

The six cases utilized for this article represent a subset of a larger cluster of 15 cases as part of a broader study (Sniewski, 2018). These six cases were chosen because the experiences represented a cross section of the data and highlighted important similarities within the data, as well as the diverse contextual factors important for clinical consideration. Participants were recruited via social media and word of mouth advertising to take part in an intervention study seeking to address their SPPPU (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic details of study participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation
Preston	34	Māori	Did not specify
Patrick	40	Pākehā*	Did not specify
Pedro	35	Pākehā	Professional
Pablo	29	Asian	Tertiary student
Perry	22	Pākehā	Tertiary student
Peter	29	Pākehā	Professional

*Non-Māori New Zealanders of European decent.

All of the participants identified as heterosexual, were aged between 22–40 ($M = 31.5$) and mostly identified as Pākehā (Non-Māori New Zealanders of European descent). Ethical approval was gained from the host university prior to commencing data collection.

Research methodology and data collection

The present research study applied mixed methodology in order to expand the scope and improve the analytic power of the findings (Sandelowski, 2000). Research methods utilized for data collection are outlined below.

Interviews

Pre- and post-study semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author either in person or over Skype, recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed for common and relevant themes between participants (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which ranged from 30–75 minutes (with most about 60 minutes). Interview questions asked about the participants' reasons for problematic self-perception; frequency, duration, and/or patterns of use; triggers for use; feelings and emotions after use; past attempts at reducing or quitting pornography; and experiences and challenges during the intervention. Pseudonyms were provided for the participants and all identifying information was changed or removed for the purposes of publication.

Daily logging spreadsheet

Participants were asked to keep a daily electronic log of various aspects of their pornography viewing, including number of viewing sessions per day and total time spent viewing per day. While logging provided important quantitative data relevant for determining the efficacy of the intervention, this article and report focuses only on how the logging exercise—in general—impacted and influenced the participant's use.

Email correspondence and diary

Participants were asked to email the primary researcher at the conclusion of each week with their updated logging spreadsheet. These emails regularly included updates from their personal lives, as well as daily and/or weekly diary reflections of their pornography usage. All journals, reflections, and correspondence during the study was optional, non-compulsory, and provided by the participants without any prompts or requests from the researcher.

Table 2. Summary results for study participants.

Participant	Reason for identifying with SPPPU	Experiences during baseline	Experiences during & after intervention
Preston	- Frequency & amount of use - Problematic for relationship	- Logging useful & helpful for accountability - Logging created increased guilt and shame - Check-ins helpful	- Triggered memories of childhood abuse & trauma - Continued check-ins helpful for Accountability - Significant decreases in frequency & duration of use
Patrick	- Duration of viewing sessions - Detracts from time with children	- Logging useful & helpful for accountability - Ceased all porn use - Check-ins helpful	- Continued willpower to abstain mentally exhausting - More time spent on phone - Zero porn use; Not accepting of use
Pedro	- Substitute for intimacy & connection	- Logging useful & helpful for accountability - Check-ins helpful	- Exacerbated mental health concerns - Increased dosage of medication for anxiety symptoms - Lowered porn use; meditation helpful/useful
Peter	- Nature of content consumed - Perceived lack of control	- Communication with others - Immediate drop in porn use	- Reflected on porn use & triggers - Ceased porn use - Positive & productive life changes - Credited meditation for positive changes
Perry	- Perceived lack of control - Perception of women as sex objects	- Logging useful & helpful for accountability - Check-ins helpful	- Slightly lower use - Able to dissociate from objectifying thoughts of women - More accepting of use; more engaged socially
Pablo	- Perceived lack of control - Time spent ruminating on porn use	- Positive & productive life changes	- More accepting of use - More engaged with life - Porn frequency slightly reduced - Porn viewing duration significantly reduced

Daily meditation

Participants were provided guided meditations and asked to meditate twice-daily following an initial randomized baseline period in which participants continued life as normal. While the guided meditations were intended to serve as the primary intervention for the study, they were also intended to serve as a quasi-research method since the predetermined time participants spent in silence and stillness each day was intended to provide conditions that support improved self-awareness and self-reflection (Lazar et al., 2005). In was anticipated and hypothesized that the environment of silence and stillness provided by meditation create an environment for participants that was conducive for reflecting on past and current pornography use, as well as other variables that could be related to pornography viewing (Table 2).

Results

Preston (34, Māori)—the power of accountability

Preston self-identified with SPPPU because he was concerned with the amount of time he spent watching and ruminating on pornography. To

him, pornography had escalated beyond a passionate hobby and reached a level where pornography was the center of his life. He reported watching pornography for multiple hours a day, creating and implementing specific viewing rituals for his viewing sessions (e.g., setting up his room, lighting, and chair in a specific and orderly way before viewing, clearing his browser history after viewing, and cleaning up after his viewing in a similar way), and investing significant amounts of time in maintaining his online persona in a prominent online pornography community on PornHub, the world's largest Internet pornography website. His motivation to seek help reached its peak when his girlfriend began questioning where the ideas for many of the sexual acts they engaged in had originated and correctly guessed it was pornography. Preston had kept his pornography viewing private and hidden from the world, so the fear of his secret life being discovered by his girlfriend led him to volunteer for the study. Preston's pre-study interview represented the first instance he had spoken to anyone about his pornography use. He reported several previous attempts at reducing or quitting pornography, all of which were unsuccessful.

From the onset of the research, Preston reported that the processes of daily logging and weekly check-ins were helpful and useful experiences. He reported an appreciation of the weekly check-ins and daily logging because of the accountability and opportunities for self-reflection they provided. Preston reported experiencing feelings of shame just thinking about being required to log his pornography use and sending the results to the researcher. Preston sometimes chose to not watch pornography as a result of these moments of pause and reflection disrupting his viewing patterns. Though optional, Preston also provided the researcher diary entries that summarized his feelings, experiences, and reflections from the previous week. He described the process of journaling as extremely helpful because he was able to reflect on his use in a way he had not previously experienced. For example, maintaining a diary helped Preston become aware of the level of detail and attention he placed on setting up his bedroom for pornography viewing. He subsequently stopped much of his pornography viewing routine and reported less time spent on both ruminating on and watching pornography.

By the conclusion of the study, Preston self-reported his overall pornography use as significantly reduced, but did not, however, attribute his decreased viewing to meditation. Instead, Preston highlighted that he felt the daily logging, weekly journaling, and the presence of an external source of accountability were the most useful components of the intervention design. Last, Preston reported experiencing mental and emotional distress during some of the meditation sessions because they brought up childhood memories of sexual abuse that he had previously forgotten. Preston then

sought therapeutic help for his distress, while also choosing to continue and complete the study despite the triggering events. Though Preston's long-term intention with his pornography viewing is abstinence, he does not think that it is realistic to stop completely at the moment. He reported feeling satisfied to have significantly reduced his pornography consumption and expressed a desire to find an external source of accountability in the form of a coach, therapist, or counselor to work with moving forward.

Patrick (40, Pākehā)—attempting abstinence

Patrick volunteered for the present research because he was concerned with the duration of his pornography viewing sessions, as well as the context in which he viewed. Patrick regularly watched pornography for several hours at a time while leaving his toddler son unattended in the living room to play and/or watch television. If interrupted by his son, Patrick would attend to his child's needs before returning to the bathroom to continue watching pornography until reaching orgasm. Despite several previous failed attempts at quitting, his intention was to quit viewing pornography permanently.

   Patrick abstained from viewing pornography throughout the entire study. For Patrick, the pre-study interview served as a catalyst for behavioral change because of the relief he experienced after being allowed to speak openly and honestly about his pornography use for the first time. Following the pre-study interview, Patrick committed to abstaining from pornography in order to take advantage of the high level of motivation he had experienced. As the study progressed, Patrick reported that the combination of logging daily pornography use and weekly check-ins with the researcher provided a level of external accountability that made it easier for him to abstain from pornography viewing. The possibility of disclosing his pornography use to the researcher provided additional motivation to continue his abstinence since logging and sharing his use would have been too embarrassing.

   At the conclusion of the study, Patrick discussed the immense effort and willpower required to maintain abstinence. Indeed, he described abstinence as hard work. Though Patrick was proud of himself for maintaining abstinence throughout the study—this was the longest he had ever quit pornography for—he also expressed worry and concern moving forward because he would once again be without an external source of accountability. Lastly, Patrick noticed that he was spending more time browsing other types of content—such as YouTube and Facebook—in the absence of pornography. He noticed that he was spending just as much time browsing non-pornographic content, but

without the definitive end and/or release that viewing pornography provided via orgasm and masturbatory ejaculation.

Pedro (35, Pākehā)—a substitute for intimacy

Pedro self-reported as being a virgin. Pedro talked about the feelings of shame he experienced with his past attempts at sexual intimacy with women. His most recent potential sexual encounter ended when his fear and anxiety prevented him from getting an erection. He attributed his sexual dysfunction to pornography use. Pedro reported using pornography as a substitute for intimacy and connection since he lived alone and did not have a partner or any close friends. Despite the feelings of guilt and shame he regularly experienced after viewing pornography, he continued viewing in order to soothe and alleviate what he described as intense feelings of loneliness and depression.

Pedro found both the logging and check-in processes to be helpful and useful. Additionally, Pedro reported that the meditations gave him significant relief from experiences of anxiety and low mood. He meditated regularly and found that the practice helped him stay calm and focused at work, which had previously been a place that triggered feelings of anxiety. During the study, Pedro also began exercising more and – on multiple occasions – chose to exercise rather than watch pornography when he was beginning to feel stressed or tempted to view pornography.

Pedro reported a significant decrease in pornography viewing by the end of the study and an overall improvement in mood and mental health symptoms. Despite increasing the dosage of one of his anti-anxiety medications during the study due work stress, he said he would continue meditating because of the self-reported benefits of calmness, focus, and relaxation he experienced after each session.

Peter (29, Pākehā)—the reflective power of meditation

Peter was concerned with the type of pornographic content he was consuming. He was attracted to pornography made to resemble acts of rape. The more real and realistically depicted the scene, the more stimulation he reported experiencing when viewing it. Peter felt his specific tastes in pornography were a violation of the moral and ethical standards he held for himself. Additionally, although he felt in control in other domains of his life, he felt pornography was one area where he had absolutely no control. The pre-study interview represented the first time Peter had spoken to anyone about his use and the self-perceived problematic nature he attributed to it.

Peter reported an immediate drop in pornography viewing. He said that after the pre-study interview he experienced a sense of relief for simply having been able to talk about his pornography use in a safe and nonjudgmental space. He was then able to converse more comfortably about pornography with his partner and close friends, and believed that those conversations represented the beginning of the end of his pornography habit.

After Peter started meditating, his pornography use ceased altogether. After a few weeks of meditating, he realized that the feelings of calmness, peace, and contentment he experienced after meditation were precisely the feelings he was seeking—and momentarily attaining—after he watched pornography. The increased self-awareness Peter reported made him feel more confident and capable of handling everyday stresses and challenges without feeling like he had to watch pornography to experience relief. He attributed these positive benefits to meditation. His intention at the conclusion of the study was to continue abstaining from pornography because he had now realized he was using pornography to avoid stressful situations instead of dealing with them proactively.

Perry (22, Pākehā)—greater self-acceptance

Perry felt he had no control over his pornography use and that viewing pornography was the only way he could manage and regulate emotions, specifically anger. He reported outbursts at friends and family if he abstained from pornography for too long, which he described as a period of roughly 1 or 2 weeks. Additionally, Perry experienced feelings of shame and guilt when meeting women in social contexts because of the sexualized thoughts and sexual objectification he immediately experienced when approaching them.

Perry described the baseline period of the study as helpful because he was able to document his pornography usage for the first time in his life. He talked about being able to see the week's consumption totals (i.e., frequency of viewing or duration of viewing), which, in turn, motivated him to make the intention to lower his pornography viewing the following week. Logging pornography viewing also made Perry more conscious and aware of why he was craving pornography. In one case, he realized that he was reaching for pornography because he was feeling sad and upset, but was attempting to avoid the experience by watching pornography.

By the end of the study Perry reported feeling more accepting of his use, despite the total frequency and duration figures only dropping slightly. He said the entire intervention experience made him feel more mindful and conscious of how, why, and when he used pornography. Instead of being

an automatic reaction to stress and something he ruminated on constantly, he now watched pornography when he felt sexually aroused. More importantly, he stopped judging himself for his conscious choice in those moments. Last, Perry reported being able to engage in conversations with women without being distracted by unwanted thoughts. Perry credited meditation for his developing capacity to dissociate himself from the sexually objectifying thoughts of women he was ashamed of previously. Though Perry continued to watch pornography, he no longer felt it was problematic and reported spending significantly less time ruminating on pornography and harshly judging himself over it.

Pablo (29, Pākehā)—the end of rumination

Pablo felt he had little to no control over his pornography use. Pablo spent several hours each day ruminating on pornography, either while actively engaged in watching pornographic content or by thinking about watching pornography at the next possible opportunity when he was busy doing something else. Pablo went to a doctor with concerns about sexual dysfunctions he was experiencing, and though he disclosed concerns about his pornography use to his doctor, Pablo was instead referred to a male fertility specialist where he was given shots of testosterone. Pablo reported the testosterone intervention as having no benefit or usefulness to his sexual dysfunction, and the negative experience prevented him from reaching out for any further help with regards to his pornography use. The pre-study interview was the first time Pablo was able to converse openly with anybody regarding his pornography use.

Pablo made additional lifestyle changes to complement his efforts to lower his pornography use. Within a few weeks of meditating, Pablo was able to reflect on his cigarette smoking and notice the similarities his smoking had with his pornography viewing. He realized that he smoked cigarettes or watched pornography when he felt stressed out or anxious about something in his life. When he started experiencing feelings of calmness and stress reduction that commonly followed his meditation practice, he noticed it was far easier to engage and stay focused on other things.

Pablo felt that the most important change he experienced was his increased capacity for self-acceptance and self-compassion. When the study began, pornography viewing had lost all of its enjoyment and pleasure, and he only watched out of habit and boredom. By the end of the study, Pablo was able to watch pornography without experiencing it in a problematic way. While Pablo's frequency of pornography use had only lowered slightly, his overall duration dropped significantly as he no longer spent significant

amounts of time ruminating on pornography or searching for pornographic content.

Summary of results

While the reasons these men provided for identifying with SPPPU were myriad and unique to their respective life circumstances, the triggers that served as the catalyst for continued consumption were similar. These triggers often took the form of affective states that were difficult to manage and regulate and viewing pornography served as the mediator for these uncomfortable experiential states even though viewing created additional problematic consequences. All of the men also disclosed the helpfulness of the pre-study interview process. While the intention was solely to gather data for research purposes, these men reported feeling relief after being able to speak openly about their pornography in a nonjudgmental space. The pre-study interview also seemed to spark the first instances of self-reflection and self-awareness of pornography consumption. This newly discovered capacity for self-reflexivity was further developed throughout the study. Indeed, participants seemed to use the daily pornography-viewing logging spreadsheet as a momentary pause for reflecting on their pornography use, considering alternative responses to their temptation to view pornography, visually assessing the amount of pornography viewing, or setting intentions and goals with regards to future viewing.

Discussion

Acceptance vs. abstinence

The data presented above suggest that the parameters for what constitutes a successful intervention for SPPPU should differ from person to person. With SPPPU, the perceived lack of control over pornography use can often lead to an erosion of self-determination and sense of personal agency (Sniewski & Farvid, 2019). Empowering the individual to determine the therapeutic goals for intervention can thus represent an important step in reestablishing a sense of personal agency and improving self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Additionally, an individual-driven recovery strategy recognizes that different intervention goals will be relevant and important for different individuals (Sniewski, 2018), especially since these men show that abstinence may not be an appropriate treatment goal. Of the six case series participants, only two successfully abstained from watching pornography, with both experiencing abstinence in dramatically different ways. While Patrick self-reported as watching pornography daily prior to the pre-study interview—sometimes for multiple hours per instance—he abstained

from pornography for the duration of the study, including the initial base-line period before he started the guided meditation intervention. At the conclusion of the study, however, he discussed the process of abstinence as "hard work," and that resisting temptations and urges to use pornography was a continued and ongoing challenge. For Patrick, abstinence was a mental burden that required constant attention and willpower. Indeed, the fact that Patrick noticed and reported that he had replaced his pornography viewing with similar quantities of non-pornographic content viewing may indicate that the psychological mechanisms at the core of the problematic behavior—regardless of the behavior in question—have not been addressed (Sussman & Black, 2008). Abstaining from pornography, in this case, may not represent a long-term strategy that supports healing and recovery if the focus remains solely on the avoidance behavior instead of the underlying mental and affective states that typically trigger problematic use (Sniewski & Farvid, 2019).

Peter, on the other hand, abstained from watching pornography as he progressed through the guided meditation intervention. Peter's experiences while meditating helped him to reflect on why he was using pornography and the resulting insights made abstaining from pornography very easy and required little effort on his part. Once he realized that the feelings of calmness he was chasing via pornography were available to him at the conclusion of his meditation practice, he preferred to utilize meditation for experiencing these positive mental and affective states because they were not accompanied by the shame and guilt he experienced after watching pornography. He reported having only slight cravings to view pornography, with little to no problem resisting those cravings. These examples suggest that Patrick will likely have a harder time maintaining abstinence—as compared to Peter who seems more at ease with abstinence—because of the energy and willpower he expends in order to abstain from viewing pornography. Thus, abstinence should be viewed contextually because the data suggest that how an individual experiences it differs from person to person.

The results emerging from these men suggest—and confirm findings within the literature (Crosby & Twohig, 2016)—that self-acceptance and acceptance of pornography use may be intervention goals that are more realistic, practical, and attainable than abstinence. These men had all experienced numerous failed attempts at quitting pornography, revealing that lapsing and relapsing dynamics usually associated with substance dependence (Larimer, Palmer, & Marlatt, 1999) are likely relevant to SPPPU. Indeed, all of the men experienced shame and an erosion of self-efficacy when they weren't able to maintain abstinence. Patrick highlights that the mental effort and sustained willpower that can be required for such drastic behavioral change is often not enough. It may only

require one stressful event for Patrick to relapse and fall back into the cycle of problematic pornography use, which would likely result in adverse and negative experiences because of the associations and beliefs he currently has between himself and pornography viewing.

In contrast, Perry and Pablo experienced therapeutic benefits when they starting becoming more accepting of themselves and their pornography use, consistent with mindfulness literature that has shown positive associations between practicing mindfulness with both self-acceptance (Carson & Langer, 2006; Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010) and self-compassion (Baer, Lykins, & Peters, 2012). Consequently, both Perry's and Pablo's pornography use lowered, which could be because the accompanying feelings of shame and guilt after watching pornography would not be present to fuel continued use (Levin, Lillis, & Hayes, 2012).

After the study, both Perry and Pablo no longer considered their pornography viewing as problematic because their viewing ceased interfering with other life realms. Rather than pornography representing a compulsive behavior triggered by stress that was no longer a source of sexual pleasure, pornography had changed into a conscious choice that was once again enjoyable. One possible explanation for such a shift and improvement could be related to the decrease in rumination that both Perry and Pablo experienced. Perry and Pablo's experiences support current research on meditation, which indicates that meditation is an effective tool for decreasing rumination because it softens and interrupts ruminating thought patterns (Hilt & Pollak, 2012). Instead of ruminating on thoughts of pornography throughout the day, they were able to watch pornography more efficiently (i.e., less browsing for perfect content), effectively (i.e., less time spent viewing per session), and mindfully, as their choice was now conscious decision to seek sexual stimulation rather than unconsciously avoiding unwanted experiences.

Therapeutic setting & space

One of the primary factors and contributors to SPPPU is the hidden and secretive nature of pornography viewing (Sniewski & Farvid, 2019). When men do not have relationships in their life where they are able to openly speak about their pornography use—and thus feel they must keep it hidden from the world—the accompanying experiences of shame and guilt compound, thus reinforcing continued use (Sniewski, Farvid, & Carter, 2018). Research has shown that the feelings of connectedness, bonding, and being listened to help create an atmosphere of self-acceptance and are negatively correlated with hypersexual and sexually compulsive behavior (Hook et al., 2015). The present study confirms what is common practice in most clinical settings, which is that

the therapist, clinician, and/or researcher play a critical role in establishing an environment conducive for therapeutic intervention (Arnow & Steidtmann, 2014).

The importance of providing a therapeutic and/or intervention setting that allows men to feel they can communicate openly has been shown to be an important factor for men with SPPPU (Sniewski & Farvid, 2019). More importantly, data suggest that clinicians and researchers working with this population may only have a single opportunity to establish such safety (Sniewski & Farvid, 2019). Indeed, a single adverse experience—similar to that of Pablo and his adverse experience with testosterone—is enough to prevent future help seeking. This finding does not necessarily constitute new information, but highlights the need for improving clinical and therapeutic awareness of pornography, as well as the potential implications of problematic and/or compulsive use (Ayres & Haddock, 2009) so that therapeutic interventions can be both appropriate and adequate.

The therapeutic setting can also provide an important and efficacious source of external accountability for men with SPPPU (Arnow & Steidtmann, 2014). These men talked about the importance of the external accountability and motivation provided by the researcher, specifically the weekly check-in processes that participants were required to do. When the men were late with their required weekly email updates, the primary researcher emailed the participants in order to check on their progress—as well as to confirm that no mental health concerns had emerged that required additional consultation or referral—which provided consistency that was greatly appreciated by the men. Participants reported feeling as though they had a personal coach that was looking over them weekly, which helped them stay focused on their intervention intentions and goals.

Mindful consumption

Mindfulness—and specifically the guided meditation intervention provided to participants—was intended to be the primary vehicle for initiating a more mindful approach to pornography viewing, as well as a tool for managing the affective triggers that often trigger pornography use (Sniewski & Farvid, 2019). Data, however, suggest that there were actually three interventions that triggered a more mindful approach with pornography consumption before participants began meditating: Daily logging of pornography-use spreadsheets, pre-study interviews, and weekly check-ins with the researcher. The process of mindfully consuming pornography often commenced during and directly after pre-study interviews. For all of these men except Pedro, the pre-study interview was the first time they had spoken to anyone about their pornography use openly and honestly.

Hearing themselves speak gave them their first opportunity to reflect on their pornography use and become more aware of what had previously been a subconscious, automatic behavior. The pre-study interview therefore served as a brief intervention for these men and began the process of increased self-awareness and self-regulation (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

The primary tool for gathering quantitative data during the intervention study was the daily logging spreadsheet, which required participants to record their daily pornography use, both in terms of frequency and duration. An unexpected finding was that the logging sheet served as a potent intervention in and of itself. Indeed, all of the participants reported the helpfulness and usefulness of logging pornography use, with some of the participants perceiving the logging process to be more helpful and useful than the guided meditation intervention. Participants reported experiencing an increased level of awareness around the contextual factors that triggered their viewing once they began the logging process. Preston reflected on the intricate routine he engaged in prior to each use, and subsequently realized he used a lot of time simply setting up his room in preparation for viewing sessions. Perry and Peter were able to notice the different affective states that triggered use and reported feeling more capable of managing and regulating these temptations and cravings to view pornography as they arose. The minor interference, pause, and/or second thought that occurred during the participants' habitual pornography use cycle was sometimes enough to stop the repetitive cycle of pornography viewing from completing itself automatically, and—more importantly—prompted important self-reflective processes instead.

The logging process triggered reflective capacities within participants, thought these instances of reflection were experienced in different ways. Preston and Patrick reported thinking about the potential shame and guilt they would feel when sharing their pornography use with the primary researcher. Both of these men sometimes chose not to view pornography because they wanted to avoid those experiences of shame and embarrassment. Perry was motivated to try to reduce his use from week to week since he could now objectively calculate and assess his weekly pornography viewing by utilizing figures provided by the logging spreadsheet. Peter was able to reflect on what—in that moment—was actually triggering his need or desire to watch pornography. When this reflective capacity was triggered, Peter was able to identify the uncomfortable affective state that he was attempting to avoid via pornography viewing. These men show that daily logging and check-in processes represent powerful tools for clinicians and professionals working with men with SPPPU, regardless of the intervention strategy or program implemented alongside them. Mobile apps, like Brainbuddy or Victory, provide mobile platforms that are specifically

aimed at providing such accountability processes, and have been used successfully for SPPPU (Hardy, Ruchty, Hull, & Hyde, 2010).

Experiential allowing

Men who experience SPPPU tend to consume pornography as a form of experiential avoidance (Wetterneck, Burgess, Short, Smith, & Cervantes, 2012). In this sense, pornography represents a maladaptive coping strategy for unwanted thoughts or negative feelings, even though pornography viewing most often leads to additional harm and unintended negative consequences (Levin et al., 2012). Research indicates that experiential avoidance accounts for both frequent pornography viewing, as well as the negative consequences associated with viewing (Levin, Lee, & Twohig, 2018). As such, any intervention that shifts an individual's coping strategy from one of experiential *avoiding* to one of experiential *allowing* should reasonably expect some level of perceived discomfort since the individual will likely experience the affective states (i.e., unwanted thoughts, negative emotions and affective states, or uncomfortable or unpleasant physical body sensations) that had been avoided via pornography use (Sniewski & Farvid, 2019).

The resulting discomfort from experiential allowing is a consideration that represents an important risk factor for monitoring, since it could lead to substitute behaviors that are either risky, harmful, or dangerous; exacerbated mental health concerns such as feelings of loneliness, anxiety, or depression; or triggering memories of abuse or trauma (Sussman & Black, 2008). It can require immense time, patience, and skill as an individual learns to cope with, manage, and regulate the uncomfortable affective triggers that would have otherwise triggered pornography use, so it is important that the adverse consequences of interventions aimed at addressing SPPPU are considered because SPPPU has been linked to, and correlated with, a variety of coexisting mental health concerns such as depression or anxiety disorders, impulsivity, compulsivity, deficient self-regulation, and high levels of neuroticism (Sniewski et al., 2018).

While research suggests that the uncomfortable states associated with experientially allowing can be managed (Bowen & Marlatt, 2009), the experience can require additional therapeutic support. This was the case with both Preston and Pedro. When Preston started meditating, within a few weeks he reported distressing memories of childhood sexual abuse that he had long forgotten. These memories were troubling and required him to seek additional counseling during the intervention because of the distressing nature of the memories that emerged. Pedro used pornography to mediate feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Even though Pedro reported

subjective improvements and benefits associated with his mental and emotional well-being after meditating, his mental health deteriorated during the study as a result of excessive work stress, a work-related situation that required an increase to the dosage of his anxiety medication. While both Preston and Pedro chose to remain in the study and continue with the intervention, their situations highlight this risk for clinicians and researchers when working with individuals with self-perceived problematic behaviors.

Clinicians and researchers would be well advised to remain aware of any potential substitute behaviors that emerge when the participant begins abstaining and/or reducing pornography use (Johnston, 2006). Pablo and Perry reported feeling more at ease and able to engage in productive, social and creative activities— like exercising, going out with friends, finding a new job—with the free time that became available after lowering pornography use. Patrick, however, reported a significant increase in the amount of time he spent browsing the Internet, specifically video content on YouTube. Rather than ruminating and seeking stimulation through pornographic content, Patrick fell into a similar ruminating pattern with non-pornographic Internet content (Arnow & Steidtmann, 2014).

Conclusion

This article explored the diverse experiences of men as they worked through their problematic behavior via a mindfulness-based intervention, while paying particular attention to the myriad of contextual factors as they relate to the underlying reasons that men identify with SPPPU and their experiences throughout an intervention aimed at addressing their SPPPU. Study results suggest that the set and setting of the intervention matter significantly, independent of the specific intervention utilized. The characteristics of the setting should include aspects of accountability for pornography use, as well as a nonjudgmental space that allows men to break their silence and communicate openly. Additionally, while the primary intervention of the research centered on guided meditations, the data suggests the participants began cultivating mindfulness around their pornography use before they began meditating. The pre-study interview, daily logging spreadsheet, and weekly check-ins triggered reflective processes for the participants that seemed to have provided a conscious break in the pornography consumption cycle, which was previously automatic and perceived to be beyond the control of the participants.

In terms of intervention helpfulness, usefulness, and effectiveness, it is difficult to discern which aspects of the intervention were most involved or important. It is likely that this depends entirely on the individual and—to a

somewhat large degree—all of the variables and factors of the intervention design likely contribute to successful intervention, including the research and/or therapist. Study results also seem to suggest that self-acceptance and acceptance of pornography use could represent intervention goals that are more realistic, practical, and attainable than abstinence. More than likely, both the meditation practice—as well as the healing space provided by the study design—contributed to the subjective improvements in self-acceptance reported by participants. Finally, as men attempt to abstain from or reduce their pornography use, it would be prudent to monitor substitute behaviors and/or exacerbated mental health concerns as the individual learns how to productively cope with, manage, and regulate the uncomfortable affective triggers that previously triggered pornography use.

The limitations of the study include a very small sample size and using self-report measures. Despite inherent study limitations, the data begin to address a significant research gap in the area of problematic pornography, specifically as it relates to the factors, contexts, and reasons why men do not seek treatment for their problematic use and why they generally do not find treatment options helpful when they do engage with support services. Last, therapists, clinicians, and medical professionals working with this population would be advised to take advantage of the logging sheet and daily logging process, as the present study highlights its efficacy and utility.

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