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## Online Daters' Sexually Explicit Media Consumption and Imagined Interactions

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**Online Daters' Sexually Explicit Media Consumption and Imagined Interactions**

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### **Abstract**

Individuals oftentimes turn to interpersonal and mass media content to cope and satisfy their sexual needs in absence of offline interpersonal connection. Online dating platforms enable virtual and physical connections between users. The literature on imagined interactions suggests that people may play out these interpersonal scenarios in their minds; however, it is less clear the role sexually explicit media exposure or mediated interactions may serve in facilitating imagined interactions. We conducted a survey to examine U.S. online daters' relationship preferences, sexually explicit media consumption practices (pornography and sexting), and imagined interactions with potential mates focusing on three primary functions: catharsis, compensation, and sexual fantasy. Results indicate that participants exclusively seeking casual, short-term relationships via online dating platforms were significantly more likely to view pornographic content online and sext with others compared to those interested in romance. We also found that both forms of sexually explicit media were positively related to experiencing imagined interactions for catharsis and sexual fantasy. Implications for research on imagined interactions and online dating are discussed, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Keywords:* online dating; imagined interactions; pornography; sexting; sexually explicit media; relationships

## **Online Daters' Sexually Explicit Media Consumption and Imagined Interactions**

### **Introduction**

Individuals frequently turn to the Internet to find and foster social connections, whether through social networking sites, online forums or, relevant to this research, dating websites and applications (apps). Though some individuals may find gratification through online-only connections, including those created via dating apps and pornographic websites, other individuals may seek comfort and company from their imaginations. Online daters seeking casual sex or romance may experience *imagined interactions* (Honeycutt et al., 1990): interpersonal scenarios which they create completely in their minds. These interactions may compensate for in-person experiences, provide stress relief in uncertain times, and more. What is less clear is whether relationships facilitated online are related to sexually explicit media use and propensity to experience imagined interactions.

Thus, in this research, we sought to understand how individuals on online dating platforms use sexually explicit media content, such as sexting and pornography, prior to or in absence of meeting potential partners face-to-face. We also consider how individuals' relationship preferences and sexual media consumption may translate into imagined interactions. The following sections outline research on online sexual activities (e.g., pornography, cybersex, sexting) and the literature on imagined interactions.

### **Online Sexual Activities**

Pornography use and sexting are two forms of sexually explicit media that fall under the umbrella of online sexual activity (Shaughnessy et al., 2011). Online sexual activities can be divided into three types: (1) *partnered-arousal activities* include sexting or engaging in cybersex with a partner; (2) *solo-arousal activities* include pornography consumption online; and (3) *non-*

*arousal activities* include looking up and learning about sexual health online (Shaughnessy et al., 2011). Pornography is content created with the primary purpose of sexually arousing the viewer, whether they are alone or with others (Ashton et al., 2019); whereas sexting includes sending and receiving sexually explicit messages or images from another, usually through one's mobile phone or other electronic means (Klettke et al., 2014).

Past research documents personality and gender differences in online sexual activities (e.g., Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Drouin et al., 2017; Sevi et al., 2018). For instance, men tend to feel more positively about solitary arousal activities (like porn), as well as partnered arousal activities, relative to women (Byers & Shaughnessy, 2014). Men also typically send and receive more sexts than women, particularly sending more photos than women do (Dir et al., 2013). Moreover, men are more likely to sext with casual sex partners than committed partners (Drouin et al., 2017). Although individuals in both serious and less committed relationships have been found to engage in sexting behaviors as well as pornography use (e.g., Carroll et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020), less attention is given to role relationship preferences or desired relationship type may play in these sexualized media consumption practices, particularly in zero-history relationships or in absence of offline meeting.

Increasingly, more individuals are able to find and keep their relationships online. Individuals who meet online may in fact be seeking an online-only relationship with no plans for an offline meeting (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). The cues available through online media options make it easier for individuals to have cue-rich, online-only relationships (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). And, for those who do plan to meet, more time may be devoted to chatting online or otherwise getting to know the other person more before meeting in-person (Ramirez et al., 2015).

Relationships and relational goals can take numerous forms, varying in their level of commitment and expected duration. Individuals may desire casual relationships (e.g., casual sex), with no expectation of long-term commitment (Wentland & Reissing, 2011). Alternatively, individuals may also seek more serious relationships, those with an expectation of long-term commitment and the development of romantic feelings (Moss et al., 1993; Knopp et al., 2020). Relationship preferences may dictate the extent to which individuals gravitate toward sexualized materials over cultivating more personal, intimate, and committed relationships with specific romantic partners. In line with social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), people seeking long-term, romantic relationships may be more inclined to focus on having conversations and taking their time to get to know someone gradually in anticipation of meeting offline (Gibbs et al., 2006; Walther, 1994). Alternatively, those seeking short-term, casual, or otherwise less committed relationships may be less invested in specific partners and turn to mediated alternatives to meet their sexual needs. Thus, we predict the following:

H1: Individuals seeking casual relationships are more likely to use sexually explicit media (pornography and sexting) compared to those seeking romantic relationships.

### **Imagined Interactions**

Worth considering related to online dating are imagined interactions. Imagined interactions are interpersonal encounters that take place completely in one's mind (Honeycutt, 2015). Individuals may have imagined interactions to plan for future encounters or to review past encounters that they have already had (Honeycutt et al., 1990). Imagined interactions are considered a form of social cognition, given that they can help individuals reflect on and plan relationships (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001). Online daters may use imagined interactions to anticipate what a new partner might say, whether online or in a real-life meeting. Imagined

interactions can help to reduce communication apprehension, for example, as individuals use imagery to plan what they might say in a given setting or to a certain person (Honeycutt et al., 2009).

An imagined interaction is primarily made of thoughts related to a verbal script with accompanying imagery (Honeycutt et al., 2015). Previous research has proposed six key functions that imagined interactions may serve (Honeycutt, 2015). These include (1) maintaining relationships, (2) conflict-linkage, (3) rehearsal of messages prior to a real conversation, (4) developing one's self-understanding (i.e., self-talk), (5) providing catharsis, and (6) compensating for a lack of real interactions. For instance, individuals experiencing an ongoing conflict with a romantic partner may imagine different ways of resolving the conflict as a form of both relational maintenance and conflict-linkage. Of all functions, the most often used is that of rehearsal (Honeycutt et al., 2009). Individuals try to plan what they will say while anticipating what another will also say.

Of interest to the present study are the functions of cathartic relief and compensation for a lack of real interactions. The function of *catharsis* is proposed to both relieve tension and reduce uncertainty (Honeycutt et al., 2013). *Compensation*, meanwhile, suggests that imagined interactions can help those who are feeling lonely or who are otherwise missing out on regular interactions (Honeycutt et al., 2013). These functions may further help us to understand online daters who maintain online-only relationships. Beyond catharsis and compensation, we also wondered if imagined interactions could serve a sexual purpose in lieu of physical touch and increased sexual media engagement. If individuals are consuming more sexually explicit media, both interpersonally via sexting and through pornographic mass media content, they may also engage in more highly sexual (i.e., *sexual fantasy*) imagined interactions. Sexual fantasy has



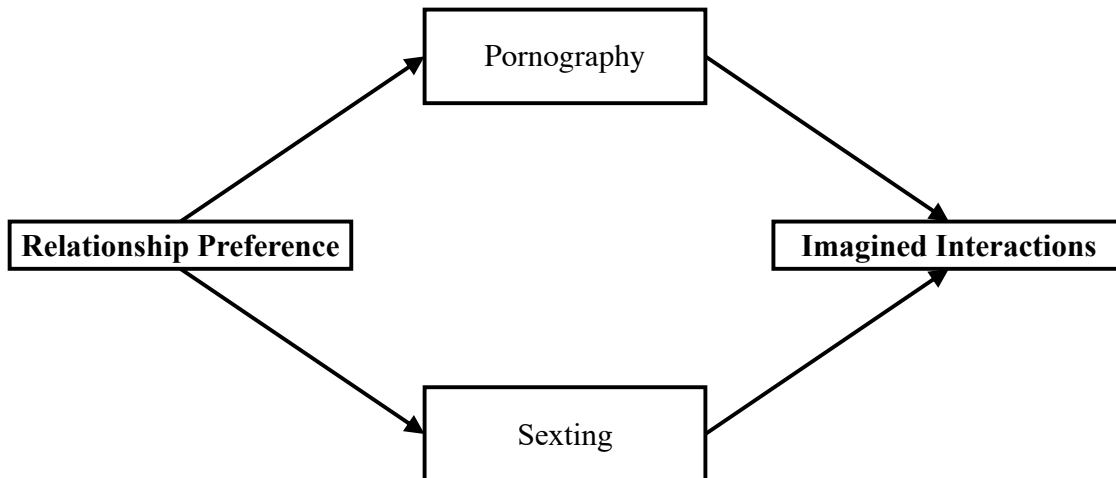
been proposed as a key component of individuals' sexual experiences (e.g., Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). However, little research to date has drawn connections between the existing imagined interactions framework and sexual fantasy. Thus, we ask if sexually explicit media use is related to imagined interactions for not only sexual gratification, but also established functions of catharsis and compensation, as follows:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between sexually explicit media use and propensity to experience imagined interactions (catharsis, compensation, sexual fantasy)?

Given we predicted an association between relationship preference and sexually explicit media consumption, we also consider if sexually explicit media consumption mediates the relationship preference and engagement in imagined interactions:

RQ2: Do different forms of sexually explicit media use mediate relationship preference and imagined interactions?

See for Figure 1 for a conceptual model.

**Figure 1***Conceptual Model*

### Method

To address our hypothesis and research questions, we conducted a cross-sectional survey that assessed individuals' online dating relationship preferences, sexually explicit media consumption (pornography and sexting), and various types of imagined interactions (catharsis, compensation, sexual fantasy).

### Participants and Procedure

We specifically recruited a sample of 315 U.S. online daters aged 18 to 78 ( $M = 34.83$ ,  $SD = 11.81$ ) through Amazon Mechanical Turk ( $n = 57$ ) and Amazon Prime Panels ( $n = 258$ ) as part of a larger project. The recruitment announcement stated that individuals must currently be active on an online dating website or app to be eligible for this study. Participants included 176 women and 139 men who identified as 70% White/Caucasian, 8.9% Black/African American,

7.3% Asian/Asian American, 6% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.6% American Indian or Alaska Natives, 4.8% Multiracial, and 1.3% Other. The majority indicated heterosexual as their sexual orientation (81.6%), followed by bisexual (13%) and gay/lesbian (3.2%). They were compensated \$1.00 by Amazon in exchange for their participation. The study took approximately 15 minutes to complete without distractions. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the corresponding author. Data was collected in early April 2020.<sup>1</sup>

## Measures

### *Pornography*

Participants were asked to indicate their agreement on five Likert-style statements (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) about their current pornography consumption created for purposes of this study. Items were subjected to factor analysis; the analysis supported a single-factor structure explaining 84.39% of the variance with loadings ranging from .87 to .94. Items include: “I seek sexual excitement via pornography,” “I am regularly watching pornographic materials [online, on television, on my phone],” “I am actively seeking pornographic entertainment,” “I want to watch videos that are sexually stimulating to me,” and “My pornography consumption is sexually satisfying for me right now” ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

### *Sexting*

Inspired by Shaughnessy and Byer’s (2014) cybersex frequency measure, participants were then asked to indicate their agreement on another set of five Likert-style statements (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) about sending and receiving sexually explicit messages (i.e., sexting). These items were also subjected to factor analysis; the analysis supported a single-

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<sup>1</sup> Data collection occurred in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States (Holshue et al., 2020). The timeframe resulted in government-mandated lockdowns, stay-at-home, and shelter-in-place orders. Health agencies and medical authorities also were recommending social distancing (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

factor structure explaining 77.85% of the variance with loadings ranging from .82 to .93. Items are: “I am sexting [sending sexually explicit text and/or photo messages] to another person,” “I am sending unsolicited sexually explicit messages [text and/or photos] to another person,” “I am receiving sexually explicit messages [text and/or photos] from another person,” “I am receiving unsolicited sexually explicit messages [text and/or photos] from another person,” and “I am sharing sexually explicit messages [text and/or photos] regularly” ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

### ***Imagined Interactions***

Participants read a brief description of what constitutes an imagined interaction (i.e., an interaction with another individual[s] that occurs in your mind; Honeycutt, 2010) and then were asked to indicate their agreement on a series of 13 Likert-style statements (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) about their imagined interaction experiences. Due to the relatively high correlations among items, the items were subjected to principal components analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .92 and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant, supporting factor analysis. The analysis revealed a three-factor structure explaining 78.59% of the variance: *catharsis* (two items;  $r = .72$ ), *compensation* (six items;  $\alpha = .93$ ), and *sexual fantasy* (five items;  $\alpha = .94$ ). See Table 1 for the complete list of items and their factor loadings.

### ***Relationship Preference***

Participants were asked to indicate all types of relationships they were seeking on online dating platforms at the time of the survey. Response options included: a long-term romantic partner ( $n = 214$ ); a short-term or casual relationship ( $n = 74$ ); cybersex or sexting partner[s] ( $n = 60$ ); a relationship for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic ( $n = 48$ ); friendship ( $n = 16$ ); or unsure ( $n = 18$ ). Because participants had the opportunity to indicate multiple relationship preferences, data revealed substantial overlap in these categories.

Responses were then categorized into three primary groups: (1) *romantic-only* (i.e., those who exclusively indicated a preference for a romantic partner;  $n = 135$ ); (2) *casual-only* (i.e., those who exclusively desired a short-term or casual relationship, cybersex or sexting partner[s], or a relationship for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic;  $n = 105$ ); and (3) *mixed-motive* (i.e., those who indicated both romantic and casual relationship preferences;  $n = 41$ ). Those who indicated “friendship” or “unsure” were removed from further analyses because we did not make a priori predictions about these categories and they were relatively underrepresented ( $n = 34$ ); thus, 281 participants were included in our formal analyses.

## Results

### Data Analysis Plan

SPSS Statistics (Version 26) was used for analyses. First, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were run to examine if relationship preference (romantic-only, casual-only, mixed-motive) is related to two forms of sexually explicit media consumption: pornography and sexting (H1). Second, linear regression was used to determine if a relationship exists between sexually explicit media consumption (pornography and sexting) and three specific functions of imagined interactions: catharsis, compensation, and sexual fantasy (RQ1). Finally, parallel mediation analyses (PROCESS macro Model 4; Hayes, 2018) tested if relationship preference affects these imagined interactions through both types of sexually explicit media consumption (RQ2). Zero-order correlations, means, and standard deviations are reported in Table 2.

### Direct Effects

H1 predicted that individuals seeking short-term, casual relationships (casual-only) are more likely to consume sexually explicit media (pornography and sexting) compared to those seeking long-term, romantic relationships (romantic-only). Two one-way ANOVAs were run

using post-hoc Tukey HSD tests to examine if relationship preference (romantic-only, casual-only, mixed-motive) influences two forms of sexually explicit media consumption: pornography and sexting (H1). Participants who exclusively expressed interest in casual relationships via online dating platforms ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) were significantly more likely to watch pornography relative to those seeking long-term, romantic relationships ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ) and mixed-motive daters ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ),  $F(2, 278) = 18.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ . These casual-only daters ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) were also significantly more likely to sext compared to romantic-only ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ) and mixed-motive daters ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ),  $F(2, 278) = 10.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . Thus, H1 was supported. Romantic-only and mixed-motive daters did not significantly differ in their sexually explicit media consumption. Table 3 summarizes these results; it includes means, standard deviations, and significant mean differences ( $p < .05$ ) organized by relationship preference using post-hoc Tukey HSD tests.

Next, we used regression analyses to address RQ1 and determine if a relationship exists between sexually explicit media consumption (pornography and sexting) and three specific types of imagined interactions: catharsis, compensation, and sexual fantasy. Pornography ( $B = 0.11$ ,  $p = .02$ ) and sexting ( $B = 0.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significantly positively associated with the catharsis function of imagined interactions,  $F(2, 278) = 48.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .26$ . Pornography ( $B = 0.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and sexting ( $B = 0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were similarly related to the sexual fantasy function of imagined interactions,  $F(2, 278) = 276.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .67$ . However, only sexting ( $B = 0.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was significantly associated with the compensation function of imagined interactions,  $F(2, 278) = 44.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .24$ . Pornography ( $B = 0.03$ ,  $p = .64$ ) did not reveal a significant relationship with the compensation function.

### **Indirect Effects**

To address RQ2, parallel mediation analyses (PROCESS macro Model 4; Hayes, 2018) were used to examine the effects of relationship preference (X), through pornography (M<sub>1</sub>) and sexting (M<sub>2</sub>), on imagined interactions (Y). Relationship preference was treated as a multicategorical independent variable in the model and dummy coded as follows: -1 = *romantic-only*; 0 = *mixed-motive*; and 1 = *casual-only*. Point estimates are reported with their 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals, based on 10,000 resamples. See Figure 2 for illustration.

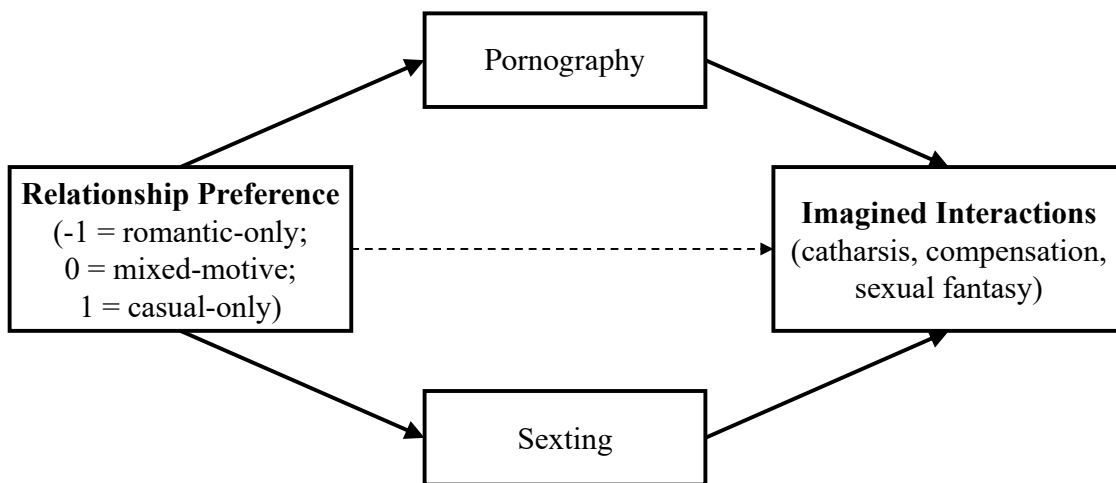
Results indicate significant indirect effects of relationship preference, through most forms of sexually explicit media consumption, on imagined interaction functions. Generally, participants who expressed interest in exclusively casual relationships (vs. romantic-only and mixed-motive) were more inclined to experience imagined interactions for catharsis and sexual fantasy; these relationships were mediated by their pornography use and sexting. Specifically, casual-only (vs. romantic-only and mixed-motive) relationship seekers reported more cathartic imagined interactions through their pornography consumption, point estimate = 0.11, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.24]; and engagement in sexting, point estimate = 0.25, 95% CI = [0.13, 0.38]. Casual-only relationship seekers also reported more sexual fantasy imagined interactions through pornography, point estimate = 0.44, 95% CI = [0.27, 0.62]; and sexting, point estimate = 0.32, 95% CI = [0.17, 0.48]. In other words, casual-only relationship seekers tend to use more sexually explicit media and are more likely to experience imagined interactions as a result relative to those who express at least some interest in romance.

Lastly, casual-only relationship seekers reported more imagined interactions compensating for in-person interactions via sexting, point estimate = 0.31, 95% CI = [0.17, 0.48]; however, pornography use did not significantly mediate this relationship, point estimate =

0.04, 95% CI = [-0.07, 0.16]. No direct effects were detected between relationship preference and imagined interactions; indirect effects are summarized in Table 4.

**Figure 2**

Mediation Model



## Discussion

This work offers insight into how relationship preferences impact one's sexually explicit media consumption, both interpersonally and via mass media. We find that individuals solely interested in casual relationships via online dating platforms are not only more likely to use sexually explicit content compared to those interested in romance, but also to experience catharsis and sexual fantasy imagined interactions through sexual media exposure. In addition, results revealed that only sexting is associated with the compensation function of imagined interactions, whereas pornography use is not related to this function. We connect these findings



to the literature on imagined interactions and explain their practical implications for relationships, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Implications**

Our findings indicate that relationship preferences are associated with sexting participation and pornography consumption. Specifically, those seeking exclusively casual relationships (e.g., short-term, casual sex, cybersex, only for the duration of the pandemic) were more likely to both sext with others and watch pornography. In line with social penetration theory, those seeking serious relationships may invest more time in relationship formation by conversing with potential mates (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Online daters focusing on short-term liaisons—instead of trying to build a deep, intimate connection to another person—were likely focused on sexual gratification and thus could use media options to meet this need.

Two recent meta-analyses suggest that pornography use is linked to negative relational consequences for viewers, such as impersonal sex and diminished relational satisfaction (Tokunaga et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2017). In a similar vein, sexting offers opportunities for more personalized, user-generated pornographic content in both new and ongoing relationships (Amundsen, 2019). Although our work finds that individuals can use sexual media to alleviate stress and satisfy their sexual needs (especially in absence of real-life interactions), it is important to consider the long-term implications of such behavior and how it translates to interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being. Future research should continue to consider the interpersonal and intrapersonal implications of sexually explicit media consumption beyond this particular context.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this work is the connection between relationship preferences and imagined interactions. It is important to note that no direct

relationships exist between relationship preferences and imagined interactions; it is only when accounting for sexually explicit media consumption that individuals experience imagined interactions. Previous work suggests that imagined interactions can be used for relationship maintenance purposes (Honeycutt, 2015). Thus, one might reason that serious relationship seekers would be more likely to use these mental exercises to keep a new relationship alive and developing in anticipation an offline meeting. Instead, those who were not seeking serious relationships and consumed more sexually explicit media were more likely to experience imagined interactions to reduce stress and satisfy their needs.

Imagined interactions were used by casual relationship seekers for catharsis, as previously suggested (Honeycutt et al., 2009). Yet we also found evidence that imagined interactions could serve a sexual function. Sexual gratification or fantasy is a new function of imagined interactions that has yet to be explored in existing research. The fact that sexually explicit media was related to one's sexual imagined interactions suggests individuals draw inspiration from such content. It is important to note, however, that those who were sexting were the only ones to experience compensation from their imagined interactions. These differences may be explained by the nature of the online sexual activities: partnered-arousal activities and solo-arousal activities (Shaughnessy et al., 2011). As previously noted, pornography is generally considered a solo-arousal activity, whereas sexting involves a partner. Having a real partner to sext, even without plans to meet in person, was necessary for an individual to experience compensation from their imagined interactions.

To further contextualize our findings, data collection occurred in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States (Holshue et al., 2020). The emergence of COVID-19 introduced a novel set of challenges for in-person connections and encounters, particularly for

those seeking romantic or sexual partnerships. Calls for social distancing practices by government and medical authorities meant that individuals were less likely to make physical contact with those they did not know or were only casually acquainted (Fetters, 2020). With social distancing and lockdowns in place, people (especially online daters) likely felt a need to compensate for lost interactions and may have found themselves with considerably more time at home, and thus potentially online.

Many individuals reported increases in their online dating use to meet and chat with others (Shaw, 2020), as well as increases in their consumption of pornography for sexual gratification (Barrica, 2020). Indeed, pornography consumption steadily increased throughout 2020 (Pornhub, 2020) with access to free online content to encourage social distancing (Iovine, 2020). Moreover, of those meeting new people online, many agreed to digital-only relationships where they could engage in cybersex or sexting, ostensibly safer than meeting offline at the time (Isador, 2020). Individuals have access to plenty of options to find stimulus to fulfill their sexual fantasies. Recent research indicates that people living alone and feeling stressed were incorporating new sexual activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, including sexting and sharing sexual fantasies (Lehmiller et al., 2020).

Although this work is particularly relevant to the pandemic context, many of these findings can extend beyond this context to better inform our understanding of media exposure and imagined interactions. We use this study as an opportunity to better understand online-only relationships and the forms they may take, especially as individuals who may not normally enter into these relationships found themselves having to at least consider them. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique context to understand imagined interactions, given that individuals were discouraged and limited in their ability to interact with unknown others in real life (Power

& Waling, 2020). Participants in our study used imagined interactions to experience sexual gratification in a time when touch and physical interaction are limited if not impossible. Future research should continue to probe different functions of imagined interactions, including other possible relationships between existing functions and sexual gratification.

There are also practical implications from this work, in addition to the theoretical considerations relating to imagined interactions. Previous work suggests that sexting and pornography consumption predict increases in risky sexual health behaviors, such as having sex without a condom (Currin et al., 2017; Dir & Cyders, 2015). Individuals who are sexting may be able to find gratification from their imaginations, thus reducing or at least delaying the potential for a risky sexual encounter. This risk takes on a different meaning in the context of COVID-19, where a casual encounter may lead to a highly infectious disease. Further, sext messages have been found to predict negative outcomes in casual relationships (Drouin et al., 2017). Yet for those who are trying to stay safe during the pandemic, sexting an online-only partner may be safer, especially if the sexts are able to serve a compensation function.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this work expands imagined interaction research, it is not without limitations that future studies should address. One limitation is the use of cross-sectional, self-report data. An online survey design was employed due to the potentially sensitive nature of our measures and the very context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we cannot draw causal conclusions from this data and should interpret our findings with respect to the specific context. Longitudinal research designs could address the rapidly evolving context and possible changes in online daters' experiences. Experimental designs may also be able to better assess how various media causally impact viewers' imagined interactions. Another limitation in this study is the lack of

previously-validated measures related to imagined interactions. Though previous research proposed a survey of imagined interactions, few studies utilize these measures. Thus, additional qualitative work in this area would be useful to more fully expand measurement of imagined interactions. Lastly, these findings are limited in terms of generalizability to online daters in the United States. Our participants also were mostly White/Caucasian and predominantly identified as heterosexual. It would be interesting to explore how these results compare or replicate with more diverse samples and outside the United States.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, media use and imagination can reduce stress and compensate for a lack of real conversations, as well as provide sexual inspiration. These effects vary by relationship preference with casual relationship seekers using more sexually explicit media and experiencing more interpersonal scenarios in their minds. Individuals use imagined interactions for previously established functions (catharsis and compensation) as well as sexual needs. It is also worth noting that catharsis, compensation, and sexual gratification are highly correlated functions and likely have overlaps. For instance, imagined interactions can offer relief from the pandemic, from the constant media coverage, as well as the inability to interact with others. Sexual gratification is likely cathartic, while also offering a sense of compensation for lacking interaction with the outside world. Our findings demonstrate how relationship preferences are linked to media selection and intrapersonal psychological effects, as well as lend insight into relationships prior to or in absence of in-person encounters.

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**Table 1***Factor Analysis for Imagined Interactions Functions*

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
I am currently using imagined interactions as a substitute for real conversations with another person.	<b>.84</b>	.21	.21
Imagined interactions can be used to substitute for real conversations with a person.	<b>.83</b>	.17	.10
Imagining talking to someone can substitute for the absence of real communication.	<b>.82</b>	.19	.20
I am currently using imagined interactions to compensate for the lack of real, face-to-face communication.	<b>.81</b>	.18	.26
Imagined interactions may be used to compensate for the lack of real, face-to-face communication.	<b>.80</b>	.21	.15
I am currently using imagined interactions to reduce my uncertainty about the world.	<b>.78</b>	.20	.30
My imagined interactions are sexual in nature.	.23	<b>.88</b>	.20
I have recently imagined a sexual situation with a new person.	.17	<b>.87</b>	.14
I have detailed imagined interactions of a sexual nature.	.21	<b>.87</b>	.20
I have watched pornography for inspiration for my sexual fantasies.	.11	<b>.83</b>	.08
I imagine sexual scenarios with current matches because I have to compensate for being unable to see them/meet them.	.31	<b>.82</b>	.17
Imagined interactions help me to reduce uncertainty about what I am going through.	.34	.26	<b>.82</b>
Imagined interactions help me relieve tension and stress.	.39	.27	<b>.80</b>

*Note.* Factor analysis revealed a three-factor structure explaining 78.59% of the variance. Factor 1 = compensation; Factor 2 = sexual fantasy; and Factor 3 = catharsis.

**Table 2***Zero-Order Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Pornography	1	.57**	.38**	.30**	.74**	3.62	1.95
2. Sexting		1	.49**	.49**	.71**	3.22	1.93
3. Catharsis			1	.64**	.52**	4.72	1.51
4. Compensation				1	.47**	4.14	1.64
5. Sexual fantasy					1	4.11	1.89

*Note.* \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

**Table 3***Summary of Descriptive Statistics by Relationship Preference*

Variable	Romantic-only ( $n = 135$ )		Mixed-motive ( $n = 41$ )		Casual-only ( $n = 105$ )	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pornography	3.09 <sub>a</sub>	1.90	3.14 <sub>a</sub>	1.76	4.50 <sub>b</sub>	1.76
Sexting	2.89 <sub>a</sub>	1.91	2.63 <sub>a</sub>	1.74	3.89 <sub>b</sub>	1.85
Catharsis	4.57	1.55	4.68	1.43	4.94	1.48
Compensation	4.09	1.60	4.02	1.62	4.26	1.71
Sexual fantasy	3.62 <sub>a</sub>	1.92	3.92 <sub>a</sub>	1.69	4.81 <sub>b</sub>	1.72

*Note.* All measures are on 1-7 Likert-style scales. Subscript letters indicate significant mean differences ( $p < .05$ ) by relationship preference using post-hoc Tukey HSD tests.

**Table 4***Effects of Relationship Preference on Imagined Interactions Through Sexually Explicit Media Consumption*

	Imagined interactions (Y)								
	<u>Catharsis</u>			<u>Compensation</u>			<u>Sexual fantasy</u>		
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Relationship preference (X)									
Pornography (M <sub>1</sub> )	0.11	0.01	0.24	0.04	-0.07	0.16	0.44	0.27	0.62
Sexting (M <sub>2</sub> )	0.25	0.13	0.38	0.31	0.17	0.48	0.32	0.17	0.48

*Note.* Relationship preference is considered a multicategorical independent variable and dummy coded as follows: -1 = romantic-only; 0 = mixed-motive; and 1 = casual-only. Point estimates are reported with their 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals, based on 10,000 resamples. Statistical significance is determined by zero falling outside of the confidence interval (PROCESS macro Model 4; Hayes, 2018).