Depiction of masturbation in North American movies

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Although masturbation is one of the most common sexual behaviours, ambivalent cultural attitudes toward this behaviour persist. We examined how masturbation is portrayed in popular North American movies as a means of documenting current social norms regarding masturbation. The sample consisted of 44 movies from 2005 to 2010 in which a target character was shown masturbating. Coders assessed several aspects of these portrayals, including the positivity of the scene, initiating factors (e.g., watching pornography, boredom), and the outcome of the masturbation (e.g., interruption, sexual relief). As well, we explored potential gender differences in these portrayals. Masturbation was generally shown in a somewhat negative light, especially when engaged in by male characters. It was portrayed as a substitute for preferred partnered sex and as often leading to negative outcomes such as being caught or interrupted. The results suggest that movie portrayals of masturbation may reinforce misconceptions about masturbation and its outcomes.

KEY WORDS: masturbation, sexuality, media, gender differences

INTRODUCTION

Masturbation is among the most common sexual activities engaged in by humans. The large majority of adults (aged 20–59) in the US report having masturbated at some point in their lives, with approximately 65% of men and 40% of women reporting masturbating in the past month (Herbenick et al., 2010a). In a study of online sexual behaviour among university students, 77% of men and 22% of women reported that they had masturbated while online in the last year (Boies, 2002). A growing body of empirical research suggests that masturbation is associated with sexual health (Coleman, 2003) and is a valuable adjunct to partnered sexual activity (e.g., Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991). Yet, many individuals continue to feel guilty about masturbating (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) and many hold negative or ambivalent attitudes toward masturbation (e.g., Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Given the importance of masturbation to sexual functioning, it is striking how little empirical information is available on current social norms related to masturbation. To provide insight into normative understandings of masturbation, the present study examined depictions of masturbation in mainstream cinema.

Background

The Judeo-Christian religious tradition has historically disapproved of the practice of masturbation based on the premise that masturbation is unnatural and inconsistent with procreative, marital sex (Bullough, 2003). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some Western medical professionals came to see masturbation as a pathology that can cause various illnesses (Bullough). For instance, Freud viewed masturbation as an incomplete sexual discharge causing neurosis and claimed that masturbation was a “primal addiction” that substituted for drug and alcohol addictions (Freud, 1897/1994; Reich, 1949). As recently as the 1930s, 83% of a sample of male college students believed that masturbation had negative effects, and less than 7% thought masturbation was harmless (Pullias, 1937). In the presence of such strong negative attitudes toward masturbation in the past, it would not be surprising if people still hold some negative attitudes toward this behaviour.

A few large-scale North American studies of college students have found relatively accepting attitudes toward masturbation (e.g., Broto, Chik, Ryder, Gorzalka, & Seal, 2005; Meston, Trapnell, & Gorzalka, 1996; Petersen & Hyde, 2010). For instance, Meston and colleagues (1996) found that, on average, college students agreed with the statement that “Masturbation is a perfectly normal sexual behavior.” However, some qualitative studies of high school and college samples have found considerable variability in attitudes toward masturbation, from strong negative views to strong positive views (e.g., Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). In a US national survey, about half of men and women who masturbated said that they felt guilty about the practice (Laumann et al., 1994), indicating at least some level of discomfort with masturbation.

Studies on attitudes toward masturbation outside of North America suggest that attitudes vary considerably, with negative attitudes more prevalent in non-Western contexts. Studies...
in sexually conservative countries such as India and Turkey have found that sizable percentages of young people hold inaccurate negative beliefs about masturbation that may impact their attitudes (e.g., Essizoglu, Yasan, Yildirim, Gurgen, & Ozkan, 2011). For instance, female college students in India who reported masturbating felt that masturbation would lead to negative health and relationship consequences despite the fact that these women had somewhat better knowledge of normal human sexuality than did women who did not report masturbating (Sharma & Sharma, 1998). In contrast, the majority of Finnish women and men born since the 1950s strongly agreed that masturbation does not endanger health (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003).

Little attention has been given to potential gender differences in experiences of masturbation and attitudes toward masturbation. Historically, there have been stronger attempts to discourage and sanction male masturbation than female masturbation (Bullough, 2003). For example, in ancient China male masturbation was unacceptable, whereas female masturbation was tolerated or ignored. Although Christian doctrine has tended to condemn non-procreative sexual acts for both genders, at various historical periods there was less focus on controlling female than male masturbation because of the belief that women were inherently devoid of sexual desire (Hill, 2008). However, in Western samples there is no evidence of gender differences in general attitudes toward the acceptability of masturbation (e.g., Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003; Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Rather, some data suggest that both genders view masturbation as more acceptable and normative when engaged in by men relative to women (e.g., Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Morrison, Ryan, Fox, McDermott, & Morrison, 2008). For example, 80% of Canadian college students felt that it would be abnormal for a man never to masturbate, whereas 46% made the same judgment about a woman never masturbating (Morrison et al., 2008). Consistent with such normative perceptions, men are more likely than women to report masturbation in any given time frame (such as in the past month or year) (e.g., Gerressu, Mercer, Graham, Wellings, & Johnson, 2008; Herbenick et al., 2010a) although this gender difference is getting smaller over time (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Moreover, some of the remaining gender difference may reflect women under-reporting their masturbation because of felt pressure to conform to restrictive female sexual norms (Alexander & Fisher, 2003).

Unfortunately, there are no large-scale studies documenting the full range of current normative beliefs about the meaning and implications of masturbation. The little research available suggests that myths about the negative health impacts of masturbation no longer hold sway in Western society (e.g., Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003). However, some young women continue to view masturbation as disgusting and shameful, perhaps reflecting a more generalized discomfort with their bodies and with their right to sexual pleasure (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Moreover, both qualitative and quantitative studies indicate that a significant minority of youth view masturbation as something engaged in by people who are not able to obtain sexual partners, thereby stigmatizing those who masturbate (e.g., Kaestle & Allen; Meston et al., 1996; Morrison et al., 2008). For instance, 28% of men and 24% of women in a large sample of German college students felt that masturbation should not occur for those in steady sexual relationships or should only occur as a substitute for partnered sex when a romantic partner is unavailable (Dekker & Schmidt, 2002).

Two experimental studies also suggest an implicit norm that relationally happy, attractive individuals should have no need to masturbate. Schwarz and Scheuring (1988) manipulated perceptions of normative levels of masturbation in male college students engaged in romantic relationships. Men who were led to believe that they masturbated relatively more often than other men reported less satisfaction with their relationships and more interest in other partners. This finding suggests an underlying societal assumption that men in happy, sexually satisfied romantic relationships will engage in masturbation less often than those in less satisfying relationships. Similarly, Durham and Grossnickle (1982) found that college students tended to assume that unattractive women would be less likely to be sexually active and more likely to masturbate than more attractive women.

Some research suggests that the masturbation habits and beliefs developed in adolescence remain relatively unchanged over the course of life (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003). Although adult attitudes on masturbation and sexuality can be affected by parental communication and modelling during childhood (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009), early communications about masturbation rarely happen within families or schools (Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Rather, young people learn about masturbation primarily through peers and media (Kaestle & Allen). The process of observational learning whereby individuals learn and internalize social norms (Bandura, 1977) may be especially important for young people who have little personal experience to draw upon. As expected, studies have shown that depictions of sexuality in media can affect young people’s perceptions of their sexualities (e.g., Pardun, L’Engle, & Brown, 2005). For example, among young male virgins exposure to sexual content on television was associated with unrealistic sexual expectations and, in turn, with regret following initial sexual experiences (Martino, Collins, Elliott, Kanouse, & Berry, 2009).

There is surprisingly little research on social perceptions of masturbation. One reason for this lack of research is the stigma that continues to be associated with openly discussing masturbation in North America (Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 2003). For example, in 1994 former US Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders was forced to resign after she made a seemingly innocuous comment suggesting that education regarding masturbation might be appropriate to help young people avoid risky sexual behaviour (Coleman, 2003). It is also challenging to conduct research on this topic. In a study of response biases to questions assessing private, deviant, and/or non-normative activities, including sexual behaviours and use of illegal substances, masturbation was judged
to be the most threatening topic (as indicated by nonresponses) and the topic most likely to make respondents uneasy (Bradburn, Sudman, Blair, & Stocking, 1978). As well, there is evidence that young men considerably under-report masturbation, indicating their discomfort with disclosing this behaviour (Halpern, Udry, Suchindran, & Campbell, 2000). Thus, people may be uncomfortable answering questions about masturbation and researchers, in turn, may be hesitant to ask these questions.

Although media depictions of masturbation have not been studied, research does indicate that media depictions of partnered sexuality are often inconsistent with what is known about actual partnered sexual behaviour. For example, in popular movies married couples rarely engage in sexual activity and, when they do, their most common sexual activity is kissing; in contrast, movies routinely depict unmarried couples engaging in intercourse (Dempsey & Reichert, 2000). Moreover, these depictions tend to reflect stereotypical gender roles in which men are expected to pursue women and initiate sexual contact, whereas women are expected both to objectify themselves and to act as gate-keepers (Pardun, L’Engle & Brown, 2005).

The current study

Media portrayals of masturbation may not only reflect social norms; they may also influence and reinforce individuals’ masturbation attitudes and beliefs. Individual masturbation attitudes and willingness to masturbate may in turn have implications for sexual health (Coleman, 2003). Therefore, the goal of this research was to document current social norms related to masturbation by examining media depictions of masturbation in North American movies reviewed by Box Office Mojo (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). Because the study was exploratory in nature, we were guided by general research questions and did not hypothesize specific outcomes. We examined the context in which masturbation was portrayed, the positivity of the masturbation experiences and scenes, and the outcomes of masturbation. Based on research suggesting that masturbation is sometimes viewed as compensating for a failure to obtain a mature sexual relationship, we also considered personal characteristics of characters portrayed as masturbating. We speculated that characters who engaged in masturbation might be presented as somewhat unattractive, immature, and emotionally vulnerable, factors which could make it difficult to establish and maintain a satisfying sexual relationship. Finally, because societal norms regarding masturbation may differ by gender, we examined potential gender differences in portrayals of male and female masturbation.

METHODS

The Internet Movie Data Base online movie database (IMDB, n.d.) was used to identify recent North American movies with masturbation scenes. Specifically, the Internet Movie Database Movie Keywords Analyzer (MoKA) feature with the keyword “masturbation” identified movie titles with masturbation. We included all movies in English, released between 2005 and 2010, made in North America, and reviewed by Box Office Mojo (Box Office Mojo, n.d.), with the exception of pornographic movies and documentaries. The criteria were designed to identify widely available movies within a clearly defined market. Five years of movies were included to reach a minimum sample size of 40 movies.

Masturbation was defined as solo self-stimulation of one’s genitals, not including any form of manual stimulation of the genitals during partnered sexual activity. A clear intent to masturbate was sufficient for inclusion, such as a character reaching toward his or her genitals. This broad inclusion criterion was used because target characters were sometimes interrupted, or the scene was cut, just as they were beginning to masturbate. If there was more than one scene with masturbation in a given movie, the first masturbation scene was coded. There were 16 movies in which masturbation was mentioned, but not practiced; these movies were excluded because the word masturbation was used in passing and did not reflect attitudes toward masturbation.

The final sample consisted of 44 movies meeting all search criteria. According to IMDB’s genre classification, the selected movies were: 69% comedies, 52% dramas, 23% romances, 11% sci-fi/fantasies, 9% mystery/crime, and 9% horror (categories can overlap). See Table 1 for a list of the movies in the sample.

We approached the masturbation scenes with two general questions: How was the masturbation experience portrayed, including the context of the act, the nature of the experience, and the outcome? And how were the masturbating target characters portrayed? The code list was developed through a series of discussions between the three authors, including analysis of six masturbation scenes in movies not included in the current study. Specific categories of grouping variables (such as the outcome of masturbation) were inductively derived. Two coders, one male and one female, coded the first masturbation scene in all movies in the sample. Reliability was assessed with Cohen’s kappa for categorical variables and coefficient alpha for continuous variables. Coder disagreements on categorical variables were resolved via discussion.

Ratings of target characters

The gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (defined by sexual behaviour and/or expressed sexual interest) of the target characters were rated. The target character’s age was estimated as 1–10, >10–15, >15–20, >20–25, >25–30, >30–35, >35–40, and above 40 years (alpha = .93). Also, target characters were rated on three personal characteristics which could make it more difficult to establish and maintain a satisfying sexual relationship: attractiveness, age inappropriateness, and vulnerability. Ratings were made on 9-point scales ranging from low (1) to average (5) to high (9) on the characteristic. Coders made these judgments based on their perceptions of how target characters compared with individuals in the general population of a similar age. The target characters’ presentation and behaviour in the entire movie were considered, not just in the masturbation scene. Attractiveness
including such factors as face, body, posture, hair, hygiene, clothes, style, and comportment (alpha = .85). Age inappropriateness was defined as acting immaturely or inappropriately for one’s age (alpha = .73). For example, a middle-aged man who lives with his mother, does not support himself, and plays video games all day would be rated high on age-inappropriateness. In contrast, a middle-aged man who has a career, maintains his own household, and engages in similar activities as other men in his age cohort would be rated as low on age-inappropriateness. Vulnerability was defined as degree of emotional and/or physical fragility (alpha = .78). For example, a woman who is temperamentally anxious, is strongly affected by daily life experiences, and has a difficult time coping with life challenges would be rated as high in vulnerability. In contrast, a woman who is emotionally resilient, independent, and able to adapt to challenging life circumstances would be rated as low on vulnerability.

**Ratings of masturbation scene and experience**

Initiating factors were defined as the contextual factors which preceded the masturbation experience and appeared to give rise to the target character’s motivation to engage in masturbation. Initiating factors were coded into one of seven categories: thinking about a crush/fantasizing/seeing an attractive potential partner, sexual frustration in absence of desired partner, seeing sexually explicit material, sexual arousal on waking up, being stressed/angry, being bored/alone, not shown, or other (Kappa = .84). When more than one initiating factor was present, the first initiating factor was given precedence. For example, in a situation in which a character fantasized about a potential partner and then sought out a magazine to look at while masturbating, the thinking about a crush code would take precedence over the sexually explicit material code.

Quality of masturbation experience was rated on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 “very negative” to 9 “very positive” (alpha = .87). This measure was solely based on the experience of self-stimulation for the target character and did not include consideration of the initiating context or outcome of the experience. Quality was coded as high if a target character experienced pleasure during masturbation and low if a target character experienced frustration or other negative feelings during masturbation.

There were four codes for the outcome of the masturbation experience. The consequence of the masturbation for the target character was coded in one of six categories: being interrupted (but not caught); being caught; experiencing relief or pleasure; experiencing negative thoughts/images/frustration/mess; other; or not shown (Kappa = .83). As well, whether the target character reached orgasm in the scene was coded as yes (as indicated by vocalizations, evidence of ejaculate, relief, etc.), no (e.g., if the target stopped or was interrupted or caught before orgasm), or not shown (e.g., if the scene was cut before the outcome was shown) (Kappa = .70). Positivity of the outcome was rated separately for the target character and for others in contact with him or her on 9-point scales (ranging from very negative to very positive). Outcome for the target character was based on how he or she felt after masturbation and also on the social consequences caused by the behaviour (alpha = .90). For example, if the target character felt relieved and happy after masturbation,

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**Table 1. North American Movies Coded for Masturbation Scenes (2005–2010)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movies</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Movies</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How the Garcia Girls Spent Their Summer</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Deeds</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Death in Love</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Squid and the Whale</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Harold and Kumar</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manderlay</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Lymelife</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy Endings</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Misconceptions</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film Geek</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Semi-Pro</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 40 Year Old Virgin</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Step Brothers</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junebug</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>The Wackness</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another Gay Movie</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Baghead</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babel</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Friday the 13th</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borat</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>The Invention of Lying</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandma’s boy</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Precious</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortbus</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Survival of the Dead</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Oh in Ohio</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>World’s Greatest Dad</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Tigers I have Known</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Youth in Revolt</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You, Me and Dupree</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Middle Men</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Children</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Cyrus</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teeth</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>The Runaways</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Good Night</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Kaboom</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nines</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Going the Distance</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiley Face</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Black Swan</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Drift in Manhattan</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>127 Hours</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
outcome was coded as high; in contrast, if the character was caught and embarrassed, outcome was coded as low. When one or more other characters (typically just one person) entered the scene after the target character had shown his or her intention to masturbate or was in the midst of masturbation, outcome for others was based on how the masturbation experience affected them emotionally or in any other way (alpha = .92 based on n = 22). For example, if a second character was aroused by the masturbation and it led to a positive sexual encounter, the outcome was scored as high; in contrast, if the other person was horrified or embarrassed, the outcome was scored as low.

The positivity of the entire scene was coded on a 9-point scale (ranging from 1 “very negative” to 5 “neutral” to 9 “very positive”) based on the context of the scene, the experience of the person masturbating, the outcome of the scene, and the mood of the scene (alpha = .81). For example, a scene with dim lighting, relaxing music, a pleasurable, satisfying, positive experience and outcome was scored as positive, whereas a scene with disturbing, embarrassing, humiliating and negative experience and outcome was rated as negative.

RESULTS

Characteristics of target characters

Seventy-five percent of target characters were male (n = 33) and 25% were female (n = 11). Eight-four percent were single (n = 37) and 16% were coupled (n = 7). Seven percent (n = 3) of characters were under 15 years of age, 45% were 15 to 25 (n = 20), 36% were 25 to 35 (n = 16), 7% were 35 to 40 (n = 3), and 5% (n = 2) were over 40. In terms of ethnicity, 77% of target characters were Caucasian (n = 34), 7% African-American (n = 3), 7% Latino (n = 3), 5% Middle Eastern (n = 2), 2% South Asian (n = 1), and 2% unclear (n = 1). Eighty-two percent of target characters were presented as heterosexual (28 men and 8 women) and 18% of the characters were presented as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (5 men and 3 women).

Table 2 presents mean ratings of target characters’ personal characteristics. Female characters were rated as somewhat above average in attractiveness (mean of 6.50 on a 9-point scale), whereas male characters were rated as average (M = 5.24), a significant difference, t(42) = 2.91, p < .01. Both female and male characters were rated as close to average on age-inappropriateness (Ms = 4.27 for women and 4.68 for men, t(42) = 0.76, ns). Female characters were rated as slightly below average in vulnerability (M = 4.59), whereas male characters were rated as slightly above average (M = 5.59), a difference that approached significance, t(42) = 1.98, p = .05. For example, in the movie Survival of the Dead (Devonshire & Romero, 2009), the female character who was depicted as masturbating is a strong and confident member of a group of AWOL National Guardsmen who shows remarkable courage in their conflict with zombies. In contrast, the male target character who was depicted as masturbating in Shortbus (Perell, Gertler, & Mitchell, 2006) had suffered from depression for years, never revealing his feelings of despair and disconnect to those close to him; the movie follows him planning and eventually attempting suicide.

Initiation

As shown in Table 3, the most common reasons for initiation of the masturbation behaviour were thinking about a crush/fantasizing/seeing an attractive potential partner, followed by sexual frustration in the absence of a desired partner and watching sexually explicit material. For example, in the movie Smileys Face (Araki, Golin, Madigan-Yorkin, Turen, & Winterstern, 2007) the target character was a young man masturbating in the shower while fantasizing about his crush. No gender differences were observed in the initiating contexts.

Quality of experience

The average male masturbation experience separate from outcome was slightly positive (5.77 on a 9-point scale), whereas the average female masturbation experience was moderately positive (mean of 7.14), a significant difference, t(42) = 3.45, p < .01 (see Table 4). A positive masturbation experience was depicted in the movie The Oh in Ohio (Leutwyler, Grieco, Tan, & Kent, 2006). A woman who had been experiencing difficulty getting aroused has an enjoyable orgasmic experience using her new vibrator before her husband walks in on her. In contrast, in the movie Death in Love (Yakin, Har’el, & Zolfo, 2008) the male target character experiences difficulty using fantasies to masturbate and becomes very frustrated.

Table 2. Personal Characteristics of Target Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>All Characters</th>
<th>Female Characters</th>
<th>Male Characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>6.50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age-Inappropriateness</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N = 44, n = 11 women, n = 33 men. Scale: 1 very low to 9 very high on the characteristic. Means with differing subscripts within rows are significantly different at p < .01.
Table 3. Frequency and Percentage of Initiation Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiation Reason</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about a Crush/Fantasizing/Seeing an Attractive Potential Partner</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Frustration in Absence of Desired Partner</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing Sexually Explicit Material</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Arousal upon Waking Up</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Stressed/Angry</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Bored/Alone</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Shown</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Othera</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N = 44.

"Other category includes: Preparation for a date, producing semen sample for medical reasons, an erotic dream, a dare from a friend, to sexually arouse partner.

Table 4. Quality, Outcome and Scene Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>All Movies</th>
<th>Movies with female characters</th>
<th>Movies with male characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Masturbation Experience</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>7.14a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome for the Target Character</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>5.82a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome for Othersa</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene Positivity</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>5.46a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N = 44, n = 11 women, n = 33 men; Scale: 1 very negative to 9 very positive. Means with differing subscripts within rows are significantly different at p < .01.

"n = 23.

Outcome of experience

Table 5 presents a breakdown of outcomes of the masturbation scenes. The most common outcomes were: being interrupted (25%), being caught (25%), and negative thoughts and images/frustration/mess (18%). Overall, the majority of outcomes were negative; 68% of cases led to a negative outcome, and just 14% led to a positive outcome. Of the scenes that were not cut before the outcome of masturbation was shown (n = 35), only 34% depicted the target character reaching orgasm. For example, in the movie The Wackness (Calder, Marino, Neurauter, & Levine, 2008), the teen who is depicted masturbating is having an enjoyable fantasy about the girl he likes when he gets interrupted by his dad knocking on his door and asking a crossword question. The son jumps out of his bed hurriedly and looks stressed. There were no gender differences in the outcomes of masturbation scenes or in the likelihood of orgasm.

The average outcome of masturbation for male characters was slightly negative (4.29 on a 9-point scale), whereas the average outcome for female target characters was slightly positive (M = 5.82), a significant difference, t(42) = 2.85, p < .01 (see Table 4). For example, in the movie Cyrus (Costigan, Scott, Scott, Duplass, & Duplass, 2010) a man gets caught masturbating in his bedroom by his ex-wife; she screams and he falls off the bed and looks humiliated. On the other hand, in the movie The Runaways (Linson, Linson, Pohlad, & Sigismondi, 2010), a teen is exploring her sexuality by trying to masturbate for the first time in a shower with the guidance of a friend. She reaches orgasm and is shown sliding down to the floor moaning in pleasure.

In half the movies, at least one other character entered the masturbation scene. In these movies, the outcome for others was also assessed. On average, the outcome for others involving a male target character was moderately negative (M = 3.47), whereas the average outcome for others involving a female target character was close to neutral (M = 4.50), though this difference was of marginal significance, t(21) = 1.94, p = .07. For example, in the movie Grandma’s Boy (Covert, Sandler & Goossen, 2006), the mother of a friend accidently walks in on a man masturbating using a plastic Barbie doll. She starts screaming, and he, in turn, screams, turns toward her, and splashes some semen toward her. On the other hand, in the movie Survival of the Dead (Devonshire, & Romero, 2009), a young female soldier is masturbating erotically out in the open. When a male soldier comes upon her, he looks pleased by what he sees and makes a playful sexual comment to her.

Positivity of the entire scene

The average scene rating involving a female target character was slightly positive (5.46 on a 9-point scale), whereas the average scene rating involving a male target character was somewhat negative (M = 3.83), t(42) = 3.77, p < .01 (See Table 4). For example, in the movie The 40 Year Old Virgin (Apatow, Townsend, & Robertson, 2005), a girl is shown having a playful experience using a shower head to masturbate.
On the other hand, in the movie Death in Love (Yakin, Har’el, & Zolfo, 2008), a middle-aged man wakes aroused and alone after having a fight with his young partner the night before. He attempts to masturbate to two aggressive sexual fantasies, but fails to become aroused and ends up frustrated.

**Exploratory analyses**

In the course of coding the masturbation scenes, the coders noticed an unanticipated pattern in the data that seemed worthy of note. As previously reported, 16% of target characters (5 men and 2 women) were depicted as having an established romantic relationship. Although relationship quality was not coded, in follow-up exploratory analyses we found that 5 of the 7 partnered target characters were portrayed as being involved in distressed intimate relationships. For example, the man shown masturbating in Little Children (Field, Berger, & Yerxa, 2006) is unhappily married and obsessed with online pornography. In the course of the movie his wife has an affair and leaves the marriage. One notable exception to the negative relationship depictions was the movie Misconceptions (Perkins & Satlof, 2008) in which members of a happy gay couple masturbate in a medical setting to provide semen for their planned child’s surrogate mother (Perkins, & Satlof, 2008).

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore social norms related to masturbation by examining depictions of masturbation in North American movies. The most common portrayal of masturbation in these movies was of a young single man who was caught or interrupted while masturbating. Initiators of the masturbation episodes were not surprising in that there was a wide variety of initiating factors, including thinking about or looking at an attractive object of desire, sexual frustration in the absence of a preferred partner, and feeling bored or alone. However, the masturbation experience itself was not especially positive. Across all target characters, the experience of masturbation was, on average, only slightly positive, and the outcomes were generally negative. In half of the masturbation scenes, characters were caught or interrupted in the act. Quite remarkably, only 14% of characters were shown as gaining relief or pleasure as the main outcome, and only one third of characters experienced orgasm as an outcome.

Although there is little research examining the nature and quality of individuals’ experiences of masturbation, the data available suggests a very different picture from what was portrayed in these movies. Notably, most individuals who engage in masturbation find the experience satisfying. For instance, the large majority of university students in Germany reported that masturbation is sexually satisfying with over 90% of men and 80% of women reporting that they had an orgasm the last time they had masturbated (Dekker & Schmidt, 2002). Similarly, in a representative US sample, the most common motivations for masturbation were relief of sexual tension and pleasure, with 80% of men and 67% of women reporting that they “usually or always” have an orgasm during masturbation (Laumann et al., 1994). Evidence indicates that prevalence and frequency of masturbation have increased over the past few decades in some European countries (Dekker & Schmidt, 2002; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003). These trends suggest increasing comfort in reporting masturbation, greater acceptance of masturbation as part of one’s sexual life, and presumably generally positive experiences.

Three-quarters of the characters who engaged in masturbation in the movies reviewed in the present study were male. Although men do report higher rates of masturbation than do women, the data suggest a more moderate difference. For instance, in a recent US national survey, 60–72% of 18 to 49 year-old women reported masturbation in the past year, in contrast to 76–81% of men in the same age group (Herbenick et al., 2010a). Another segment of the population not adequately represented in these movies is middle-aged and older adults. Although rates of masturbation tend to decline with age, close to two-thirds of men and half of women over 50 years of age report that they continue to masturbate (Schick et al., 2010). Of course, it may be that the overrepresentation of younger, Caucasian men in these movies reflects the over-representation of this group in movies in general and is not specific to masturbation portrayals.

Consistent with research documenting the attitude that masturbation is not appropriate for those in couple relationships (e.g., Dekker & Schmidt, 2002; Morrison et al., 2008),
just 16% of target characters were depicted as having an established romantic relationship, implying that coupled individuals are less likely to masturbate than those who are single. However, several studies have indicated that the large majority of men and at least a sizable minority of women in established relationships report recent solo masturbation (e.g., Dekker & Schmidt; Gerressu et al., 2008; Herbenick et al., 2010b; Reece et al., 2010). It was further observed that when partnered characters were shown masturbating, they were generally involved in distressed and unsatisfying relationships. Again, the data suggest that most individuals in satisfying and active sexual relationships engage in masturbation (e.g., Dekker & Schmidt; Gerressu et al.; Laumann et al., 1994). With the exception of female characters being depicted as quite attractive (and more attractive than male characters), the personal characteristics of target characters were not distinctive. Target characters of both genders were rated as close to average on age-inappropriateness and vulnerability, and male target characters were rated as close to average on attractiveness. Thus, these movies do not suggest that unattractive, immature, or insecure individuals are most likely to masturbate; rather, they suggest that it is young, sexually unfulfilled individuals who engage in this practice. However, it may be that the bias in popular movies against portraying physically unattractive characters restricted the range of attractiveness portrayed and, therefore, the likelihood of observing unattractive characters engaged in masturbation.

Despite the similar patterns of initiation and outcome events for men and women, masturbation was portrayed more positively when engaged in by women. Scenes with female masturbation were more positive in tone than those with male masturbation. As well, female target characters were rated as having a more positive experience and more positive outcomes from masturbation than were male target characters. Similarly, outcomes for others walking in on the target character masturbating tended to be more positive for female than male masturbation, though this difference did not reach significance. The gender-based difference in the positivity of the masturbation portrayal could be based on a false assumption that men who masturbate cannot find a sexual partner, whereas women who masturbate choose to do so as an independent sexual act. Consistent with this explanation, there was a tendency for women who masturbated to be portrayed as less vulnerable – hence more confident, resilient, and independent – than were men who masturbated. Another possibility is that this difference reflects a general tendency to sexually objectify women in the media (American Psychological Association, 2007), resulting in the portrayal of women’s masturbation as more erotic and appealing to watch than men’s masturbation. Consistent with both explanations, women shown masturbating were more attractive than their male counterparts.

It is also possible that the more positive depiction of female masturbation in these movies reflects less negative social norms, or perhaps less clear social norms, for female than male masturbation. Historically, masturbation (and sexuality in general) in women has not been given as much attention as masturbation in men, perhaps resulting in less stigma and negative views surrounding women’s masturbation (Bullough, 2003). There is some initial research suggesting that the most commonly reported outcome of masturbation for women (college students in the US) was a feeling of empowerment (Bowman, 2011). No comparable research has been conducted with men, and we are not aware of any research findings documenting that men experience any comparable positive outcomes from masturbation. Further, women are more likely to experience orgasm alone than with a partner, whereas men are equally likely to experience orgasm in both sexual contexts (Davis, Blank, Lin, & Bonillas, 1996; Dekker & Schmidt, 2002). Therefore, perhaps women stand to gain more from masturbation than do men.

In summary, North American movies depict masturbation in somewhat negative terms, especially when engaged in by men. The tendency for masturbation to lead to negative outcomes was especially striking. This negative portrayal of masturbation is ironic given growing evidence that masturbation can be helpful for achieving sexual health (Coleman, 2003). For example, frequency of masturbation in women has been associated with greater ease in becoming sexually aroused (Carvalheira & Leal, 2013) and greater sexual satisfaction (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991). Young women and men who positively value masturbation view it as essential for sexual self-knowledge, as a safer sex alternative, and as helpful in developing healthy sexual relationships (Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Furthermore, masturbation is a useful tool in the treatment of a range of sexual dysfunctions (Coleman). Misconceptions about masturbation, perhaps in part influenced by negative media portrayals, could lead to a hesitancy to explore masturbation and, for those who do masturbate, to feelings of guilt and shame. In both cases, such negative attitudes could undermine the potential benefits of masturbation for individual well-being (Coleman). As well, misconceptions about masturbation could have negative effects on individuals’ relationship satisfaction independent of any associations with sexual functioning (Schwarz & Scheuring, 1988). Thus, media portrayals of masturbation as leading to negative outcomes and as inconsistent with satisfying sexual interactions may indirectly undermine individual and relationship well-being.

We have assessed media portrayals of masturbation during one period (2005–2010) and only for movies made in North America. However, depictions of masturbation may shift over time with changing societal values, as well as across countries and cultures. For example, some European surveys suggest that over the past few decades both men and women report starting to masturbate at earlier ages and report greater likelihood of masturbation when in relationships (Dekker & Schmidt, 2002; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003). Further, the gender differences in reported masturbation rates are getting smaller (Petersen & Hyde, 2010, Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003). There is also evidence that attitudes toward masturbation differ substantially across countries and cultures (e.g., Joshi, 2010; Meston et al., 1996). One way to docu-
ment and understand these changes would be to analyze the portrayal of masturbation in the media of different countries over time. As well, these findings do not necessarily generalize to other forms of media. Masturbation portrayals may differ in prevalence and form in different media such as TV, which is highly regulated, versus popular music, which is less regulated.

CONCLUSION

North American movies depict masturbation as a behaviour engaged in by young to middle-aged individuals who do not have access to satisfying partnered sex and as likely to lead to negative outcomes. Large portions of the population, including older adults and those in satisfying intimate relationships, are absent. These negative portrayals are concerning because they imply that masturbation is somehow problematic and is indicative of relationship dysfunction. Viewers may perceive these depictions as somewhat realistic, especially if they lack the knowledge or experience to these depictions as somewhat realistic, especially if they lack the knowledge or experience to evaluate these depictions. Media portrayals may be especially influential with topics such as masturbation which are personal, stigmatized and avoided in public discourse. Thereby, media may both reflect and shape societal attitudes. More constructive attitudes toward masturbation may be fostered by sex-positive sex education programs that explicitly discuss and critique the limitations of media portrayals.

REFERENCES


Depiction of masturbation in North American movies


