

Pornography's Effects on Interpersonal Relationships

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An as intern at an adult psychiatric hospital, my first client was a woman who had a partner she described as “addicted” to pornography. For some time, she had been struggling to change his behavior—through cajoling, pleading, threats and ultimatums, tears, and tantrums. Although at times effective for a little while, she continually found a re-stocked stash of pornographic materials, despite his promises to stop. Her distress and his inability to hear her distress reached such high levels that she had attempted suicide: thus her admission into the hospital and our meeting.

I had studied depression, anxiety, trauma, and psychosis, but I was wholly unprepared for this. Was this a cognitive distortion? Did she just need to “lighten up,” to stop interpreting his behavior in unhealthy and unhelpful ways and just accept it? Did she have a right to demand that his sexuality be limited to what she found acceptable? Was there such a thing as pornography addiction? Was there something else going on she was unable to talk about directly? Could she actually be that upset over something so normal? Didn’t all men look at pictures of naked women and masturbate?

As a neophyte clinician and conscientious graduate student, I immediately consulted the professional and scientific literature. I found an array of articles examining how short-term exposure to pornography in a laboratory setting affected male viewers. I found not one single empirical study of pornography use from the romantic partner’s perspective. My research area was born.

Fortunately, in the past decade, research on the interpersonal effects of pornography use has risen considerably. This paper will begin by describing theoretical models that help explain how pornography affects interpersonal relationships and then review research that helps systematically disentangle the full spectrum of effects that pornography may exert in

interpersonal relationships. Although I will be focusing primarily on romantic relationships, these results often extend to parental, work, and peer relations.

Several theories exist for how pornography affects consumers and others. We will look at the imitation, social learning, sexual script, permission-giving beliefs, perception of social norms, and cultural climate models.

Models of Pornography's Effects

Imitation Model. The simplest is the *imitation model*. It theorizes that consumers imitate what they have seen. There is some indirect and qualitative support for such a theory,¹ but it is grossly inadequate. Most users do not commit the abuses they see in the pornography. This model ignores the complexities of the relationship between media and individual behavior and suggests that consumers of pornography are uncritical automatons. Critics of anti-pornography efforts have repeatedly focused on this model for their attacks, stating that consumers are aware of the difference between fantasy and reality.²

This has implications for public policy. If this model was the only or even the primary mechanism by which pornography affected users, limiting access or even banning pornography would clearly be indicated. However, the evidence does not support such a simplistic mechanism.

Social Learning Model. A slightly more complex theory, this model posits that people learn through observation, but that only behaviors that are rewarded are likely to be imitated.³ Thus, if a pornographic depiction shows a man overpowering a woman sexually, when she initially refuses such advances but eventually invites them and derives pleasure from them (a script for what is called the "rape myth"⁴), the viewer learns that overpowering women sexually leads to sexual rewards both for himself and his partner, and he is then more likely to imitate the behavior. Research has continually demonstrated that the combination of sexual arousal and violence results in more misogynist attitudes and behaviors than depictions of violence

¹ Silbert and Pines (1984).

² Loftus, (2002).

³ Albert Bandura, (1967).

⁴ Bauserman, (1996).

against women or sexually explicitness alone.⁵ However, as with the imitation model, this model is limited in its ability to explain the discrepancy between widespread and common use of pornographic materials and relatively low rates of overt sexual violence.⁶

This implication for public policy of the social learning model rest on both individual media consumers and media producers. Individuals, such as parents, may need to monitor the media they or their children consume to avoid depictions wedding violence and sexuality. On the other hand, regulatory bodies such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) may seek to ban such media from public sale. In fact, countries such as England and Australia have made it illegal to sell or possess violent pornography⁷.

Sexual Scripts

Sexual Script Model. A more general version of both models is *sexual script theory*. Scripts are memory structures that provide information and rules for behaving. They evolve over time and with repeated exposure to a set of stimuli or with repetition of particular behaviors.⁸ For example, people develop scripts for how to behave in a public library, a football game, or when stopped by a police officer for speeding.

Pornography's scripts emphasize culturally accepted beauty standards, the idea of the constant sexual availability and insatiable sexual appetites of men and women, the excitement of sexual novelty, and sex outside of a primary romantic relationship.⁹ It rarely includes affection, intimate relationships, expressions of love, and it often involves men ejaculating outside of a woman's body while she expresses orgasmic pleasure. Frequently, pornography lacks foreplay and afterplay: the focus on sexual penetration is so pervasive that caressing, kissing, or cuddling are minimized or eliminated.¹⁰

As scripts for sexual intimacy with a real life partner, these nearly always fall short. Sometimes a partner is too tired or too ill to desire sex. Sometimes the comforts of a routine

⁵ Malamuth, (1984).

⁶ Kimmel and Linders, (1996).

⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/berkshire/7851346.stm; McKee, 2005

⁸ Lakshmi-Ratan and Lyer (1988).

⁹ Brosius et al.(1993).

¹⁰ Mosher and Maclan, (1994).

sexual encounter are precisely what one desires. Sometimes we feel unattractive. And sometimes, although one hates to admit it, we prefer hurried sex, before the kids' Saturday morning cartoon finishes. Furthermore, real life requires the capacity to switch mental gears so that we desire sex despite last night's argument over hanging up wet towels and having seen one another pass gas. Unlike a movie, these awkward moments are not edited out of life. They are the very fabric that creates intimacy. It is not surprising, then, that learning about gender roles through pornography's unrealistic portrayals leads to reduced sexual and relational satisfaction.¹¹

But this is not pornography's most disturbing script. A recent content analysis of fifty best-selling adult videos revealed a grim "reality" characterized by inequality and violence.¹² Nearly half of the 304 scenes analyzed contained verbal aggression, while over 88% showed physical aggression. Seventy percent of aggressive acts were perpetrated by men, and 87% of the acts were committed against women. By far the victims' most common responses were pleasure or neutrality. Fewer than 5% of the aggressive acts provoked a negative response from the victim, including flinching and requests to stop. This pornographic "reality" was further highlighted by the relative infrequency of more positive behaviors, such as verbal compliments, embracing, kissing, or laughter.

The importance of the sexual scripts usually seen in pornography may explain why women are more likely to respond negatively to "conventional" pornography compared to men.¹³ Women consumers are likely to react negatively to the scripts just described. If this is the case, pornography that better adheres to women's romantic and sexual scripts ought to be better received, and "femme pornography" (made by women for women) should produce greater sexual arousal and more positive affect in women, since it focuses less on the genitals and male pleasure, and more on slower, sensual sexual pleasures and relationships.

One study found that men liked both types and that both increased their post-viewing sexual activity (both solitary and otherwise), while women were more disgusted by

¹¹ Shapiro and Kroeger, (1991).

¹² Wosnitzer and Bridges (2007).

¹³ Pornography of the sort analyzed by Brosius and colleagues (1993) and Wosnitzer and Bridges (2007).

conventional pornography but more aroused and less negative about femme pornography.¹⁴ They engaged in higher levels of sexual intercourse, though not of masturbation, following exposure to femme videos.

These two models also have implications for policy. If they help explain how pornography exerts its effects on users, efforts should be aimed at limiting production and consumption of pornographic materials that reward aggression and violence against others. Sexually explicit materials that promote egalitarian depictions of erotic encounters would be preferred.

Two Other Models

Two other cognitive models of pornography's effects on users, both drawn from the alcohol and substance abuse literature,¹⁵ merit discussion. Cognitive models focus on internal thoughts and beliefs or interpretations of stimuli that then drive behavior. They explain why the same event can have very different meanings for different people—why, for example, one woman may encourage her partner's pornography use while another is completely devastated.¹⁶

Permission-Giving Beliefs Model. The first of these models refers to thoughts that rationalize behavior.¹⁷ Pornography users may tell themselves that the women clearly enjoy what they are doing and are not harmed by it (many pornographic DVDs include bloopers and deleted scenes that reinforce this belief), or that using pornography is much better than seeking out women for affairs.

Interestingly, my own research suggests that female partners of male pornography users utilize similar permission-giving beliefs. For example, many women report thinking that their partner's behavior is preferable to his having a real-life affair, that all men view pornography, and that it is a relief at times that her partner does not turn solely to her to fulfill his frequent sexual demands.¹⁸

¹⁴ Mosher and Maclan (1994).

¹⁵ Newman & Ratto, 1999)

¹⁶ Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003)

¹⁷ Layden, 2008; Loftus, 2002)

¹⁸ Bridges et al. (2003).

Perceptions of Social Norms Model. This model describes how the heavy use of pornography skews the users' perception of what is normal (that is, what the average person does), so that they are unable to recognize just how uncommon their own behavior is. Heavy use normalizes this use and leads to over-estimation of how frequently certain sexual activities are actually practiced. Adolescent boys with higher consumption rates of pornography are more likely than others to engage in anal and group sex and to report "hook ups" (having sexual relations with a friend who is not a romantic partner).¹⁹

In using cognitive models to decide policy, the downside is that they place the problem, and therefore its solution, firmly inside the individual. Although community-wide campaigns with corrective educational information may attempt to change social norms, the proposed mechanism of change remains at the level of the individual's thoughts.²⁰

Cold and Hot States

One important implication of the cognitive models is that each relies on the rational choice of the consumer: the viewer chooses to behave in a way that has been previously modeled and reinforced by adult films, or provides permission-giving thoughts that serve to neutralize other thoughts that may turn him away from pornography. The user may be following a scripted cognitive map of how to behave in sexual situations, or rationally be considering how normative his behavior may be. Treatment relies on appeals to a more rational mind: one that asks the pornography user to weigh carefully his values and possible long-term consequences for behavior, and then make a choice.

However, in a clever study, behavioral economists at MIT demonstrated that these "cold," rational choices are different from those we may make while in a "hot" or aroused state.²¹ College men were asked to answer questions about sexual interests and behaviors while in a "cold" state of mind (simply reading the questions) or in a "hot" state of mind (while masturbating to pornographic pictures). They were asked about risky sexual behavior; sexual arousal, including whether they found elderly women, young girls, or shoes sexually arousing;

¹⁹ Häggström-Nordin et al. (2005).

²⁰ Perkins (2002; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, and Griskevicius (2007).

²¹ Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006)

sexual behavior, including their interest in slapping someone during sex, bondage, or in engaging in anal sex or bestiality; and sexual violence, including their willingness to coerce someone in order to have sex.

During the aroused state, they were significantly more likely to report behaviors, people, and objects as sexually arousing and increased willingness to both engage in the behaviors and to use coercive methods to obtain sex. The only two items arousal did not affect were their willingness to have sex with other men and their interest in having sex with the lights on.

This study points to an important consideration when planning interventions for pornography users: what is wholeheartedly and earnestly promised in a cold state will not readily translate into real behavior change while in an aroused state. It may be preferable to have people practice behaviors in the same physiological state that they will be experiencing when expected to perform them.

A More Comprehensive Model

Cultural Climate Model. A more comprehensive model for understanding the effects of pornography on interpersonal relationships considers larger contextual and societal factors rather than the way individuals interact with pornographic media. The *cultural climate model* states that pornography contributes to an environment in which violence toward women becomes acceptable, but that the broader environment itself contains what can be called “pornography norms.”²² These effects are seen not only in men’s perceptions of women, but in women’s own perceptions of themselves.

Theoretically, exposure to pornography results in reduced self-esteem and body image satisfaction, increased sense of vulnerability to violence, and an increased sense of defenselessness in women, and in men in reward for displays of hyper masculinity and trivializing or excusing violence against women. Partial support for this has been found in the psychological literature,²³ but pornographic norms for gender relationships and sexuality infuse many other forms of media, such as music videos, reality television shows, even children’s toys.

²² Kafka, Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1997).

²³ Kafka et al. (1997).

Thus, it becomes difficult to distinguish pornography's specific effects from those of the general climate of gender inequality in a pornified culture.²⁴

Interestingly, some research suggests that whatever relationship may appear to exist between consumption of pornography and violence against women is better thought of as a relationship that is supported by general social acceptability of violence as a whole, with sexual violence being but one of many types. One study of circulation rates of pornographic magazines and incidents of sexual assault found that an initial positive relationship was made non-significant with the inclusion of a measure of approval of violence in general.²⁵ Such findings support the cultural climate theory.

The American Psychological Association has already spoken of the negative effects of a more sexualized culture on girls.²⁶ Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that higher exposure to sexualized imagery and pornography is associated with earlier initiation of sexual activity, increased sexual risk-taking behavior, and increasingly tolerant attitudes toward sexual promiscuity.²⁷ Similarly, more frequent viewing of pornographic videos is associated with higher engagement in anal sex, group sex, and hook-ups.²⁸

Third Person Effects. An important consideration when speaking with the public about the effects of pornography is the empirical finding that people are significantly more likely to perceive others as being susceptible to media influences while simultaneously believing that they are immune.²⁹ Thus, public education must include both information about how pornography exerts its effects and information about this perceptual bias so that people are not so quick to dismiss the educational message.

This model is akin to the radical feminist sociopolitical position: it advocates for widespread cultural change in how sexuality is constructed. A simple ban on certain materials would be insufficient, since pornography norms are infused throughout the culture. Instead, new models of healthy sex and gender relationships are required, models that do not view sex

²⁴ Paul (2005).

²⁵ Baron and Straus (1984).

²⁶ APA (2007).

²⁷ Wingood et al. (2001).

²⁸ Häggström-Nordin et al. (2005).

²⁹ Häggström-Nordin et al. (2005).

appeal as narrowly defined by physical looks, where a person's worth is determined by more than just sexual behavior, where sexuality is expressed between consenting beings, each with the freedom to choose this activity over another. In these new models of healthy sex, people are not reduced to sexual objects, valued only insofar as they can sexually service one another.

The Interpersonal Effects of Exposure

Having described the theoretical models that help explain how pornography affects interpersonal relationships, I now turn to the research that helps us understand pornography's effects on interpersonal relationships. Among the effects of the use of pornography are an increased negative attitude to women, decreased empathy for victims of sexual violence, a blunted affect, and an increase in dominating and sexually-imposing behavior.

Pornography increases negative attitudes to women. Media depicting women as objects, existing for male sexual pleasure, and as subordinates, negatively affect the users' attitudes and behaviors toward women. Studies have examined the impact of pornography on attitudes of gender roles. One study of male college students found that their use of erotic material (sexually explicit materials that were non-violent and non-degrading) did not affect their attitudes toward women.³⁰ However, their use of pornographic materials (sexually explicit materials that included coercion or violence) was (though the effect was small) positively correlated with beliefs that women should occupy more gender-defined, traditional roles, should be less independent than men, drink and swear less, exhibit less interest in sexual behaviors, and maintain more traditional roles in marriages.

The results have direct implications for romantic relationships. Men who consume pornography may expect their partners to occupy traditional female roles and be less assertive. This restriction could lead to increased dissatisfaction among their partners.

Decreased Empathy, Blunted Affect

Pornography decreases empathy for victims of sexual violence. Another study of college men found that after repeated exposure to one of three film types (graphically violent sexual

³⁰ Garcia (1986).

films, degrading but nonviolent pornographic films, or degrading but nonviolent and nonsexual films), those who had seen the violent sexual film showed significantly less sympathy for a rape victim during a mock trial than did the others.³¹ Interestingly, those who saw the nonsexual but degrading film generally did not differ significantly from control subjects (who had not seen any film) in their empathy for the victim. The authors concluded that the combination of degradation and sexually explicit material seems particularly detrimental.

In a similar study of college women the subjects were assigned to view sexually explicit but nonviolent films, sexually explicit and violent films, or mildly explicit but graphically violent films for four consecutive days. On the fifth day, they were told the last film had not arrived and were invited to participate in an experiment on jury selection for a rape trial through the university's law school. Women who had seen the graphically violent films showed reduced empathy for the victim and a decreased sense of personal vulnerability to crimes compared to the other two groups. However, they did not change in their endorsement of the rape myth.

A review of studies of attitudes to rape, found that six of the seven studies of people who had viewed pornography for less than one hour found that exposure to violent pornography had significant negative effects (reduced sympathy for victims, increased sense of the woman's responsibility for the rape, and decreased punishments for the perpetrator).³² Of the seven studies of people who had viewed violent pornography for more than one hour, five found negative effects (more lenient sentences for the rapist, less empathy for the victim, less support for women's equality, and greater endorsement of their own likelihood of raping were they assured they would not be caught). The two studies that did not find such effects had shown only nonviolent erotica.

Attitudes such as these can affect romantic relationships, both directly and indirectly. Directly, legitimizing violence in male-female interactions may put more women at risk (this will be discussed in greater detail later on). Indirectly, a relationship in which the man holds such demeaning attitudes is likely to result in diminished relationship satisfaction.

³¹ Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1988).

³² Linz (1989).

Pornography leads to blunted affect. Anxiety-provoking stimuli lose their ability to evoke strong reactions with repeated exposure.³³ Researchers have argued that this occurs with violent and degrading pornographic material.³⁴

A study of college men demonstrated that repeated exposure to violent, sexually suggestive material leads to declines in the negative emotions they feel when viewing such material.³⁵ Participants were repeatedly exposed to overtly violent, mildly sexually explicit films (“slasher” films), sexually explicit, nonviolent but degrading films, or nonsexual but degrading films. The first group became habituated to the slasher films, so that by the last day, they reported significantly less anxiety and depression than they had at the beginning of the study. The feelings of the other two groups did not change. Each group, however, perceived the materials to be less violent, negative, and degrading on the last day than they had on the first.

This blunting of strong affect is not limited to men.³⁶ The study of college women described above, women who had watched violent films responded to these disturbing films with less anger, anxiety, or upset than they did initially. Those who had watched sexually explicit but nonviolent films remained upset by the violent films. This desensitization to the degradation and violence of women has negative implications for interpersonal violence in romantic relationships. Unlike the male subjects in the previous study, the women did not change from the first to the last day their perceptions of how violent or degrading were the films. While women still recognized violence after repeated exposure to these films, they demonstrated less of a strong negative emotional response to the violence.

Dominance and Imposition

Pornography increases dominating behaviors. Exposure to pornography also results in more dominating, degrading, and sexualizing behaviors in men. In one study using male and female college students, the males were told they were participating in a study of the perceptions of media communications and randomly assigned to one of three films: erotica,

³³ Marks and Dar (2000).

³⁴ Russell (1993).

³⁵ Linz et al. (1988).

³⁶ Kafka et al. (1997).

nonsexual news coverage of war, or pornography.³⁷ Following the films, they were invited to attend a short, ostensibly separate experiment in which each was paired with a female participant in a problem-solving task. They were filmed while completing the task, and trained raters coded the videotapes to determine behaviors for each participant, including eye gaze, interruptions, touch, unwanted sexual remarks, and disregard of a partner's suggestions. The men who viewed the sexually explicit films (both erotica and pornography) showed more dominant behaviors, touched their female partners for longer periods of time, and ignored their partner's contributions more often than males who viewed the news clips. Furthermore, men who had watched the pornography interrupted their partners more and showed more anxious behaviors than those in the other two groups.

The authors were interested in seeing whether the *women's* behaviors varied as a function of the film their partner had watched. The women did not know that their partners had watched these movies, but their behavior correlated highly with their male partner's. Women whose partners had viewed sexually explicit materials showed similar levels of anxiety, physical proximity, partner touch, and gazing at their partners. This behavioral matching, argue the researchers, suggests that women can be negatively affected by a partner's use of sexually explicit material, *even when they are unaware of such use*.

Pornography increases sexually imposing behaviors. Studies of aggression in the laboratory must use proxy tasks, as one obviously cannot ethically put participants in danger.³⁸ To deal with this problem, the authors of one study investigated a more subtle form of sexual aggression: exposing a woman with known negative attitudes toward sexually explicit material to erotica or pornography.³⁹ The female was a confederate supposedly engaged in a memory task, and the participants (both men and women) were instructed to attempt to distract her by showing her a series of slides. They could choose from pictures of sports, autopsies, nudes, partners engaging in sexual acts, or sexual deviance (including bondage). They knew the woman disliked sexually explicit material, and they also knew that all categories of slides were equally distracting to her.

³⁷ Mulac, Jansma, and Linz (2002).

³⁸ cf. Donnerstein and Barrett (1978).

³⁹ Hall, Hirschman, and Oliver (1994).

Of the males, 72% ignored the woman's stated dislike of sexually explicit materials and showed her slides from one of the three explicit categories, while 44% of the females did so. The authors replicated the experiment, but this time the participants were told that the female was neutral about sexually explicit materials. Female use of the sexually explicit slides was similar to that of the previous experiment (41%), but significantly fewer males (54%) showed the sexual material. The authors suggest that this type of disrespect toward a woman's stated preferences has implications both in the workplace for sexual harassment, and in the home for romantic relationships. Specifically, men may use sexual media or locker-room talk in an instrumental way—to distract, impose, or subtly aggress against women (especially women with a known dislike for such media). In relationships, perhaps this means that men may use sexual media to “get back” at a partner when angry.

Pornography's Effects within Romantic Relationships

There are numerous ways in which sexually explicit materials can be incorporated into romantic relationships. For example, couples may choose to view such materials together, as an enhancement to their sex lives. Many couples that have done so have felt positively about such shared use.⁴⁰ Sexually explicit materials may be acceptable alternatives to sexual intercourse when a partner is absent or simply too tired for sexual relations. In such instances, the use is usually perceived as benign by both partners.⁴¹ Sexually explicit materials have been used successfully by numerous marital and sex therapists to enhance lovemaking in romantic relationships.⁴²

However, more often than not pornographic materials are used outside of the relationship, in private, and often without the knowledge of the romantic partner.⁴³ The combination of secrecy, sexual activity outside the relationship, and the user's perceptions of the alternative “reality” portrayed in pornography have led significant numbers of women to

⁴⁰ Bridges et al. (2003).

⁴¹ Clark and Wiederman (2000); Moll and Bridges, in preparation.

⁴² Robinson, Manthei, Scheltema, Rich, and Koznar (1999).

⁴³ Cooper, Scherer, Boies, and Gordon (1999).

find their partners' use disturbing.⁴⁴ Studies of the effects of pornography on romantic relationships show that they have reasons for concern.

Pornography use can be addictive. A clear negative consequence of pornography use is that it may escalate to the level of addiction.⁴⁵ The negative effects of compulsive use—use that occurred despite negative consequences to the person's occupational or relationship functioning—may be obvious, such as the loss of a job due to surfing adult websites on the company computer, but may be more insidious, such as role disruption that occurs when a husband spends significant portions of his evenings online masturbating to explicit images rather than being with his family.⁴⁶ In fact, increasingly, pornography use is becoming implicated in marital ruptures.⁴⁷ Depression and stress are risk factors for compulsory use.⁴⁸

Women are reluctant to enter into relationships with frequent pornography users. The discovery of a partner's use of pornography can be a traumatic event.⁴⁹ Some women report feeling shocked, hurt, and confused when they learn of the nature and extent of their partner's sexual activities. One study, asking whether or not foreknowledge about a potential romantic mate's use of pornography would affect intentions to enter into a serious, long-term relationship asked college men and women to view numerous mock online dating website-like profiles of individuals and to rate their interest in pursuing a long-term romantic relationship with each person.⁵⁰ Women had significantly lower intentions to pursue a relationship with a potential mate who frequently used pornography. In contrast, men's knowledge of a potential female partner's pornography use was completely unrelated to their pursuit intentions.

Decreased Satisfaction

Pornography leads to decreased satisfaction with a romantic partner. The association between use of pornography and dissatisfaction in romantic relationships has been shown. Even short, experimental situations involving a one-time exposure to popular pornographic

⁴⁴ Bridges et al. (2003).

⁴⁵ Carnes (1992; Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000); Levert (2007).

⁴⁶ Schneider (2000).

⁴⁷ Coombes (2002).

⁴⁸ Cooper et al. (1999); Kafka (2000).

⁴⁹ Bergner and Bridges (2002).

⁵⁰ McGahan and Bridges, in preparation.

depictions create negative consequences for males' evaluations of their romantic partner's attractiveness and how in love with them they feel. Compared to men who watched a neutral film, men who watched a pornographic film subsequently rated themselves as less in love with their romantic partner.

In a sample of internet users, happily married people were 61% less likely to report visiting a pornographic website in the prior thirty days.⁵¹ Similarly, a survey of heterosexual couples found differences in sexual satisfaction associated with men's pornography use. Specifically, couples where men reported high use of pornography reported significantly lower sexual satisfaction than couples where men viewed less pornography.

In a two-part study, researchers first found that exposure to pictures of female centerfold models from *Playboy* or *Penthouse* significantly lowered both men's and women's judgments about the attractiveness of "average" attractive persons. This occurred regardless of whether or not they found the pictures to be pleasant.

In the second part of the study, centerfolds from *Playgirl* were used along with the *Playboy* and *Penthouse* centerfolds. After viewing the opposite sex models, participants were asked to rate how sexually attractive they felt their mate was. Men who had looked at the centerfolds rated their female partner's attractiveness and scores on Rubin's Love Scale significantly lower compared to the males who had not seen the centerfolds, but women's ratings were not. This supports the notion that in this culture men find physical attractiveness to be more central to their sexual responding than women, and that consumption of popular pornographic magazines may adversely affect males' commitments to monogamous relationships. It also validates women's experiences that they are being unfavorably compared to the impossible ideal portrayed in pornography and erotica.⁵²

Very strong experimental evidence demonstrates that pornography can negatively impact sexual satisfaction within a current, heterosexual relationship. Similarly, over a six-week period, participants in one study viewed either common, nonviolent pornographic videotapes or sexually innocuous comedic acts taken from prime time television.⁵³ Following repeated

⁵¹ Stack, Wasserman, and Kern (2004).

⁵² Bergner & Bridges, 2002)

⁵³ Zillmann and Bryant (1988)

exposure to pornography, sexual satisfaction significantly decreased for both men and women in partner's displays of affection, their physical appearance, sexual curiosity, and their actual sexual performance. More general items of satisfaction (e.g., general life happiness, satisfaction in non-romantic relationships, and so forth) remained unchanged, showing that the reduction in satisfaction was specific to the sexual partner of the participant, not a decline in satisfaction overall.

Although men's use of pornography has a demonstrated negative relationship to satisfaction with a romantic partner, women's use is more complex. In one study of heterosexual couples, women's use of pornography was positively associated with their male partner's relationship and sexual satisfaction.⁵⁴ The researcher suggests that this difference may be explained by the primary reason for use of pornography: for men, it was a masturbatory aid, but for women, it was part of lovemaking with their partner.

To explore further the relationship between shared versus solitary use of pornography, another study examined survey data for men and women who reported being in a romantic relationship.⁵⁵ Approximately half of survey participants reported viewing explicit materials with their partners, and they reported higher relationship and sexual satisfaction. These results were particularly strong for men. The researchers believe that this may be due to the different sorts of explicit materials that tend to be marketed toward individual male users versus couples. Sexually explicit videos marketed to couples tend to emphasize story lines and foreplay and afterplay, use softer lighting, and include less focus on genitalia and fewer close-up shots of coital activity.⁵⁶ (Currently, I am exploring this further in a study of forty romantic couples.)

Problematic Usage

Pornography users may not see their use as problematic... A survey of 9,177 internet users found that 70% kept secret from their romantic partner how much time they spent online in their sexual pursuits.⁵⁷ While most (68%) felt their online sexual pursuits did not interfere

⁵⁴ Bridges (2008)

⁵⁵ Bridges, McGahan, & Morokoff (2008)

⁵⁶ Pearson & Pollack, 1997)

⁵⁷ Cooper et al. (1999).

with any area of their lives, follow-up analyses found that 93% of males and 84% of females admitted that others in their lives had complained about their online sexual activities.⁵⁸ Another study of web users found that participants without internet sexual experiences were significantly more likely to rate the use of pornography as an act of infidelity compared to users.⁵⁹

... *However, partners of users are affected.* The use of pornography not only affects the attitudes and behaviors of the consumer, it affects his or her partner's well-being. In the most extreme example, a study of women entering a program for battered women in a large metropolitan city showed that a partner's pornography use nearly *doubled* the odds that a woman reported being sexually assaulted by her partner.⁶⁰ Forty-six percent reported being sexually abused, and 30% reported their partners used pornography. Fifty-eight percent identified their partner's pornography use as having played a part in their sexual assault. Although alcohol reduces inhibitions, alcohol use did not significantly increase prediction of sexual assault above and beyond that of pornography use alone.

Partners of identified "sexual addicts" (91 females, 3 males) were interviewed in one study to determine the effects their partner's cybersex use had on their romantic relationships.⁶¹ The effects they reported included feelings of hurt and betrayal, lowered self-esteem, mistrust, decreased intimacy, anger, feelings of being unattractive and objectified, feeling their partners had less interest in sexual contact, pressure from the partner to enact things from the online fantasy, and a feeling that they could not measure up to the women online.

Interestingly, women who had had frequent, repeated exposure to pornography and found it difficult to avoid in their daily lives are the most negative about such materials (29% of the sample).⁶² These women disliked pornography immensely because of its negative images of women and unrealistic standards of physical attractiveness. They tended to see women as being victimized or violated in such materials.

⁵⁸ Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, and Maheu (2002).

⁵⁹ Whitty (2003).

⁶⁰ Shope, 2004).

⁶¹ Jennifer Schneider (2000).

⁶² Senn (1993).

Over half of these women were involved with male consumers of pornography, and most felt negatively about this. They identified with the females portrayed in such materials. They had argued with their partners about their use, had felt rejected by it, reported that it had a negative impact on their relationship, and believed part of how they were being treated by their partners was a result of the pornography use.

Also noteworthy, women who held neutral to mildly positive views on pornography (7% of the sample) were nonetheless conflicted about its impact on their personal romantic relationships.⁶³ They did not feel pornography showed violence and victimization of women, nor did they believe it was related to violence against women. They viewed themselves as very distinct from the women in the pornography. However, they did feel that it created unrealistic standards of physical attractiveness and sexual prowess, and that this had hurt their self-esteem or made a partner's use emotionally painful.

When asked to imagine a scenario where their partner used sexually explicit materials to engage in solitary sexual stimulation, women had fewer positive reactions and more negative reactions, while men were more likely to view a partner's use of sexually explicit materials as an attempt to enhance the couple's sexual experience.⁶⁴ Both men and women disagreed slightly that the use was due to problems in the romantic relationship, particularly when no use of pornographic materials accompanied the masturbation. Participants did not react negatively to this sort of sexual activity, perhaps because the scenarios were hypothetical and described as taking place when the partner was out of town. Reactions might have been considerably more negative if the partner was described as available at the time of the behavior, since that would more clearly show the partner *choosing* the sexually explicit material and/or masturbation over sexual relations with their partner.

To explore this possibility, a similar study asked college women to read a series of descriptions of romantic couples in which the male partner used pornography, some when his partner was in town, some when his partner was out of town.⁶⁵ The study participants rated the women in the stories as being less satisfied with their bodies and their relationships when

⁶³ Senn (1993).

⁶⁴ Clark and Wiederman (2000).

⁶⁵ Moll and Bridges, in preparation.

the partner was as a heavy user of pornography, and as even less satisfied when the partner was in town and presumably available for sexual relations.

When how partners feel about the use of pornography in a real-world context rather than a hypothetical scenario is examined, the results are clearer. Talking with women who identified their partners as pornography “addicts,” were quite upset over this use, and were seeking help from an online, anonymous, public forum. One study found that the woman’s partner’s use of pornography was associated with her having numerous devastating interpretations of her role in his use, his moral character, and the state of their romantic relationship.⁶⁶ Themes of the women’s self-descriptions included seeing herself as the reason for her partner’s use (“I am not attractive enough,” “I should be more available”), seeing the partner as uncaring or selfish (“If he loved me, he wouldn’t hurt me this way,” “I’ve told him it bothers me and he still uses pornography; he must not care about me”), and viewing the relationship as a farce (“We pretend like everything is fine, but really our relationship is sick and unhealthy”).

Another study conducted a web-based survey of 100 women whose partners used pornography. Nearly one-third reported moderate to high levels of distress about their partner’s use of such material.⁶⁷ They reported feeling as though their partners were not interested in making love to them, but during sexual intercourse were picturing the women they had seen in the pornography. They also felt their partners were less trustworthy, usually because he’d keep the use a secret from them (even when they did not object to it).

Nearly three-quarters reported feeling that the use negatively affected their self-esteem. Some felt they had failed their partners sexually; if they had been better sexual partners, their partners never would have had to turn to such material for sexual satisfaction.

An Intriguing Finding

These studies show that, for a significant minority of women in heterosexual romantic relationships, their partner’s use of pornography negatively impacts their perceptions of themselves, their partners, and their relationship, but that a majority express either neutral or

⁶⁶ Bergner and Bridges (2002).

⁶⁷ Bridges et al. (2003).

positive attitudes toward it. While the distressed and broken marriage merits our clinical attention, this intriguing and consistent finding merits our scientific attention. Why do some women report interpersonal difficulties stemming from a partner's use of pornography while others do not? What characterizes couples who are able to accommodate such use successfully, perhaps even in a manner that enhances the self-reported quality of their relationship, while others become so distraught that they consider divorce or even suicide?

This phenomenon remains a mystery, but its solution may provide us with insight regarding the mechanisms by which pornography exerts its negative effects. Currently, I am exploring this question in a study of forty heterosexual couples. Although these data are not yet available, I am certain that they will generate numerous fruitful pathways for future research that will continue to enhance our understanding of this important area of study.

Summary

As pornography has becoming increasingly accessible, it has played a more prominent role in romantic relationships and in shaping sexual norms. The experimental and survey data reviewed above suggest that there is cause for concern: young men and women who report higher pornography use and from earlier ages engage in more risky sexual behaviors. Compulsive pornography use is hurting some marriages and increasingly playing a role in divorce. Although there is growing recognition of its potential for harm, therapists are largely untrained in the many ways pornography use can impact individuals, couples, and families. An important first step is acknowledging the role pornography plays in these negative life events. However, we must continue to research *how*, *for whom*, and *why*, so that we can help those who have been hurt and prevent future harm.

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