

How Pornography Affects the Sex Lives and Intimate Relationships of Adolescents

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Abstract

This article will briefly examine research regarding the use of pornography by adolescents and attempt to determine whether the increased obtainability of porn could negatively affect their lives. Much of the available research on the topic links the incidence of things like sexual-risk-taking, substance abuse, ‘sexting’, and adolescent dating abuse (ADA) with the viewing of pornography, but many of the studies fail to prove causality. This review will look at the ways in which the proliferation of pornography, and its increasing availability affect the sex lives of adolescents. ADA is a rampant problem in today’s media culture, as is ‘sexting’, and there are many instances of young women sending nude pictures to young men at their school (or elsewhere), either by request, or unprompted. These incidents have potentially devastating, legal consequences and could destroy the lives of all parties involved. Much of the current research asserts that education is key here, and that if we can educate youth about what to expect and how to be prepared for such instances, we can provide them with a much more enriched sexual education.

Introduction

Sexually explicit materials are everywhere from R-rated movies, to pop-up ads, to music videos to straight-up pornography. They can include anything from suggestive dancing, to ‘softcore’ pictures like those of *Suicide Girls*, to pornographic pictures in magazines like *Playboy*, to hardcore, sexually explicit materials (SEMs), which are often videos, found on sites like PornHub.com. “Now, with a few keystrokes, anyone with access to the Internet can be on sites that include much more sexual content than Playboy ever did” (Brown & L’Engle, 2009, p. 129). For adults who can easily discern the differences between what they see in the media, and what they expect to experience in real life, this doesn’t pose much of a problem. In fact, viewing pornography as an adult (whether one agrees with the ethics of the industry or not) can be a safe way to explore one’s sexual preferences in an inclusive and non-judgmental environment (Hare, Gahagan, Jackson and Steenbeek, 2014, p. 151). For adolescents, however, it poses more of a risk to their sexual development. Dolf Zillmann explains that because sexual education programs that are current for the 21st century are lacking, “erotica has come to serve as the primary agent of sexual socialization” and that “new media technology gives prepubertal children and postpubertal adolescents ready access to erotica in all their manifestations” (2000, p. 41). In short, kids between the ages of 11 and 18 are turning to pornography for sexual education because their school curricula aren’t teaching them what they want to know. This isn’t to say that the current programs of teaching anatomy and birth control methods aren’t important, but that the information available to youth has expanded exponentially and the formal education programs have yet to catch up.

This may be a problem, as pornography viewing by adolescents has been linked to increased sexual callousness (Zillmann, 2000, p. 41), lower commitment to relationships

(Lambert et al., 2012, p. 417), evaluating SEMs as realistic (Štulhofer, Buško and Schmidt, 2012, p. 103), and ADA victimization (Rothman and Adhia, 2015, p. 1). These are only a few examples, but they confirm that the area needs further research and attention. Most of these surveys cannot prove causality, meaning that it is unclear whether the types of people who are sexually risky (i.e., engage in unprotected sex), are also the type of people who are more likely to seek out SEMs. They cannot prove that viewing SEM causes abuse, callousness or sexual coercion, but one thing is for sure, and that is that kids are turning to porn for education. For this reason, and maybe this reason alone, it's necessary to carefully examine the materials that kids have access to, and decide how to thoughtfully, appropriately, and courageously teach students what to expect in their real-life sexual endeavors.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding the pornography use by adolescents and young adults is largely skewed, in that the vast majority of surveys (see Carroll et al., 2008 p 1-19 and Morgan, 2011, p 520-530) are of university or college students. This leaves out groups including (but not limited to) underprivileged youth who can't afford post-secondary education, children ages 11-18 and young adults who decided to pursue a career in trades. The exception is an article by Rothman and Adhia (2015), which tackles "adolescent pornography use and dating violence among a sample of primarily Black and Hispanic, urban-residing, underage youth" (p. 1). The authors acknowledge the hole in the research where these groups fit, and although their sample was small (n=72), it wasn't too small to attempt to address some issues regarding the porn usage of these groups, allowing for a more generalized approach to the research as a whole. Their

participants, who were between the ages of 16 and 17 (i.e., underage to view pornography), were surveyed at a large safety-net hospital (which serves primarily low-income and uninsured patients) in Boston, MA. Rothman and Adhia also touch on one thing that other articles miss completely and that is the *type* of pornography being viewed. They clarify by saying that “one problem with the debate about the potential harms of pornography is that it presupposes that all pornography is alike. In actuality, pornography is now available in dozens of genres and is consumed in a wide variety of settings [...]” (2015, p. 2). Most of the other literature documenting porn use, lumps the entire industry into one singular category, when, in reality, it can range from artistic and romantic (aka ‘female friendly’), to violent and brutal.

The next study that stood out from the rest, was the only one that took a qualitative, holistic approach to the impact of pornography, in this case, on 12 college students. The authors (Hare, Gahagan, Jackson and Steenbeek, 2014) conducted in-depth interviews instead of surveys; they evaluated each participant’s pornography-viewing tendencies one by one, and determined that young adults’ relationship with SEM was complex, but not all terrible. One thing that *was* noted, was that these university-level students turned to sexually explicit Internet movies (SEIM) “to learn about ‘non-normative’ content that is typically stigmatized or censored in mainstream portrayals of sexuality” (p. 151). They go on to say that “the diverse ways individuals use SEIM can reflect a multitude of sexual health needs generated by the wider social context: for example, information-seeking, responding to wider sexual pressures, or seeking a “normalization” of a sexual desire” (p. 156).

Ouytsel, Ponnet and Walrave (2014), take yet another approach to pornography in one of the other studies solely focused on adolescents in high school. They tackle the news-worthy incidence of sexting. The authors assert that sending and requesting ‘sext’ messages, images, and

videos are all significantly associated with the consumption of pornography (p. 776). They say that their study shows that “pornography use is not only associated with adolescents’ offline sexual behaviours, but that it is also linked with a virtual form of sexual experimentation (i.e., sexting)” (p. 776).

One last article is worth mentioning in the limited scope of this review, because it was referenced by many of the other papers examined, and that is: Generation XXX: Pornography acceptance and use among emerging adults by Carroll et al. (2008). The authors compile an impressive list of figures based on the survey of 813 university students from six college sites across the U.S., one of the most interesting of which was

that although gender differences in pornography use remain consistent across the three age cohorts, increases in the acceptance of pornography among older emerging adult women place men’s and women’s acceptance of pornography at the same level by the time that they reach their mid-twenties (p. 17-18).

Carroll et al.’s study also included the fact that “two thirds (66.5%) of emerging adult men reported that they agreed [...] that viewing pornography is acceptable, whereas emerging adult women were evenly split on whether viewing pornography was an acceptable way to express one’s sexuality” (p. 16).

Conclusion

With each survey completed, and each new method tested for the topic, academia gets ever closer to understanding the effect that viewing pornography has on people in general, and adolescents specifically. Hopefully, the efforts of those in the field will come to fruition and we

can revise the outdated sexual education programs that exist today, in order to include the vast worlds of the Internet.

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