



Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology

Volume 11 | Issue 1

Article 7

2015

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Recommended Citation

(2015) "Pornography Use in Romantic Relationships," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol11/iss1/7>

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Pornography Use in Romantic Relationships



By Nathan Leonhardt

Abstract

Despite the increasing attention to pornography as a research topic over the past 20 years, little research has explored the relation between pornography use and both sexual satisfaction and infidelity in a romantic relationship. Research results consistently show that pornography use is positively correlated with infidelity in romantic relationships, but the evidence is mixed for short-term versus long-term sexual satisfaction. Pornography use is positively associated with short-term sexual satisfaction but not necessarily long-term satisfaction. However, studies of self-esteem and delay of gratification indirectly suggest that pornography use has a negative influence on long-term sexual satisfaction.

Keywords: pornography, infidelity, romantic relationships, sexual satisfaction

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Internet use has played an important role in making pornography a \$13 billion industry in the United States and a \$93 billion industry worldwide (Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012; Poulsen, Busby, & Galovan, 2013). Moreover, researchers have taken greater interest in pornography's influence. From 1970 to 1990, only 161 peer-reviewed articles appeared in PsychINFO on the subject of pornography, but since 1990, 370 articles have appeared (Poulsen et al., 2013). Carroll, Padilla-Walker, Nelson, Olson, Barry, and Madsen (2008) claimed that pornography's growing prevalence is accompanied by an increase in its use and acceptance. Specifically, the authors reported that 66.5% of males in their sample considered pornography culturally acceptable and 86.1% used it in the past year; meanwhile, 48.7% of females considered it acceptable and 31% used it.

Most researchers agree that pornography is the display of sexually explicit material to stimulate sexual arousal and activity (Carroll et al., 2008; Lambert et al., 2012; Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). Recently, pornography's association with romantic relationships has been the focus of research (e.g., Lambert et al., 2012; Poulsen et al., 2013). For example, Olmstead and colleagues (2013) found that 70.8% of men and 45.5% of

women considered pornography use acceptable in a romantic relationship. Improvement in mood, sexual satisfaction, and sexual fantasies were cited as positive outcomes. Those who considered the use of pornography unacceptable feared that it would produce a decrease in trust and mutual respect and an increase in infidelity (Lambert et al., 2013; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012).

Some researchers have asserted that pornography use exerts both positive and negative effects on romantic relationships. They agree that pornography use may increase the risk of infidelity, but it also increases sexual satisfaction (Maddox, Rhodes, & Markham, 2011; Olmstead et al., 2013). Similarly, they have found that the manner in which couples use pornography influences relationship outcomes. When both partners consent to use non-violent pornography, no negative effects are seen, and sexual satisfaction increases (Maddox et al., 2011; Olmstead et al., 2013). Other researchers have found that pornography use is associated with negative outcomes, regardless of the manner of use (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012).

The length of a romantic relationship is also a factor in pornography-produced sexual satisfaction (Poulsen et al., 2013). Studies with samples of emerging adults in short

term relationships reveal a positive association between pornography use and sexual satisfaction. (Lambert et al., 2012; Olmstead et al., 2013). However, in samples where couples have had a more permanent relationship over a period of time, they are more likely to report a negative association between pornography use and sexual satisfaction. (Poulsen et al., 2013; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012).

Short-term Sexual Satisfaction

The most common method of measuring sexual satisfaction is self-report. Studies of sexual satisfaction usually focus on emerging adults, who tend to report an increase in sexual satisfaction in their short-term romantic relationship when using pornography (Lambert et al., 2012; Olmstead et al., 2013).

The General Rule

Hald and Malamuth (2008) and Olmstead et al. (2013) found that “spicing up” the relationship is a major reason for the increased sexual satisfaction in a romantic relationship. The following quote from a 23-year-old man exemplifies this view:

I do not see any harm in viewing explicit materials in any circumstance. It is normal and gives the individual ideas to make sex more interesting. It is

okay to watch them (sexually explicit materials) together or alone because, once again, it helps excite the relationship when someone brings something new to the bedroom (Olmstead et al., 2013, p. 630).

The view that the use of pornography “excites” the relationship is not held only by men. Rogala and Tyden (2003) reported that pornography use made young women feel “sexier”. Overall, both men and women appear to have higher sexual satisfaction from pornography use in short-term romantic relationships.

The way couples use pornography in their romantic relationship is a primary factor in whether sexual satisfaction increases (Maddox et al., 2011; Olmstead et al., 2013; Poulsen et al., 2013). Maddox et al. (2011) found that viewing pornography alone while in a romantic relationship decreased the couple’s sexual satisfaction. However, couples who used pornography together or in some combination of viewing it alone and together, reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction than couples who completely abstained from pornography use.

The Exception

Couples who report high levels of religiosity appear to be the exception to the general rule. For them, pornography use has a negative influence on short-term

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sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships (Olmstead et al., 2013). Carroll et al. (2008) found a subset of individuals who were using pornography without believing it was acceptable. Subsequently, Nelson, Padilla-Walker, and Carroll (2010) hypothesized that religiosity would be a major contributor to the discrepancy between pornography use and acceptance. Their results revealed that 35% of those who identified themselves as religious used pornography, but none stated that pornography use was acceptable. Olmstead and colleagues (2013) found that almost all respondents who disapproved of pornography use under any circumstance, including romantic relationships, used religious reasoning for their disapproval.

Individuals with high levels of religiosity report a high level of shame associated with pornography use in a romantic relationship (Nelson et al., 2010; Olmstead et al., 2013). Such shame may have a negative influence on sexual satisfaction (Woo, Morshedian, Brotto & Gorzalka, 2012). An alternative explanation involves the perspective of religious individuals on committed relationships. Woo et al. (2012) found that religious individuals are more likely to wait for marriage before having sexual relations. Although religiosity appears to have a negative influence on short-term sexual satisfaction (Woo et al., 2012), those who wait for

marriage before having sexual relations may end up having higher sexual satisfaction in the long term (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010).

Long-term Sexual Satisfaction

Because most studies of the influence of pornography use on romantic relationships involve emerging adults, they fail to adequately account for long-term sexual satisfaction (Malamuth et al., 2011; Olmstead et al., 2013; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012). One factor that sets long-term sexual satisfaction apart from short-term sexual satisfaction is physical attractiveness, which declines with age (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007). Poulsen et al. (2013) were among the few researchers who included respondents over 30 years of age. The age range was 17 to 58, with the median age of 32 for males and 29 for females. The researchers found a weaker relationship between sexual satisfaction and pornography use in romantic relationships than found in previous studies of emerging adults. In particular, the man's use of pornography was negatively associated his own sexual satisfaction and the sexual satisfaction of his partner.

Self-Esteem

Decreased self-esteem (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012) and the failure to delay gratification (Busby et al., 2010; Mischel, Shoda, &

Rodriguez, 1989) may be associated with the negative outcomes from pornography use on long-term sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships. Sanchez and Kiefer (2007) showed that pornography use was negatively associated with self-esteem in both men and women. Although pornography use was negatively correlated with men's self-esteem as their physical attractiveness declined, the negative correlation with women's self-esteem was more immediate and may have been due to women's greater sensitivity to the objectification of women that is characteristic of pornography (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012).

Delay of Gratification

The delay of gratification is defined as waiting for an appropriate time and place to engage in a tempting act (Berk, 2009). Pornography use may compromise an individual's ability to delay gratification (Lambert et al., 2013; Maddox et al., 2011). Busby and colleagues (2010) examined the relation between the delay of gratification and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships. Controlling for variables like religion and education, they found that individuals who waited for marriage before engaging in sexual relations had higher levels of sexual satisfaction than

comparably-aged peers with a history of premarital sexual relations.

Furthermore, the same researchers suggested that a higher incidence of positive sexual experiences in longer-term romantic relationships was associated with a greater focus on the emotional aspects of sexual satisfaction as opposed to an exclusive focus on the physical aspects. Given pornography's emphasis on the latter, as physical attractiveness declines with age, pornography using couples may be less likely to experience long-term sexual satisfaction because of the weaker influence of emotional factors in their romantic relationship (Lambert et al., 2012).

Infidelity

Many females accept pornography use in romantic relationships because they consider pornography a deterrent to infidelity (Olmstead et al., 2013). Specifically, they view the increased sexual arousal that pornography use brings as increasing their attractiveness to their partner (Olmstead et al., 2013). Maddox and colleagues (2011) called this view into question as a result of research in which couples who used pornography reported half the incidence of sexual fidelity as those who did not use pornography. Although the study involved emerging adults, other researchers have shown that pornography use in romantic relationship is

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consistently and negatively related to fidelity (Lambert et al., 2012; Olmstead et al., 2013; Poulsen et al., 2013).

Flirtatiousness

Lambert et al. (2012) researched pornography's influence on specific aspects of commitment and infidelity. One study involved self-report by respondents who had indicated they were in an exclusive relationship and were asked about pornography use and their personal commitment to the relationship. Overall, a mean negative correlation ($r = -0.22$) was found between pornography use and commitment. The correlation coefficient for men was -0.52 .

In another study by Lambert et al. (2012), the respondents were all in an exclusive heterosexual romantic relationship and reported their pornography use. Three weeks later, they were asked to chat in a new social network with a research assistant. They were told that the conversation was part of a test of the network, but the real aim of the study was to establish the respondent's level of flirtatiousness with an unknown person with the opposite gender. A positive correlation ($r = 0.38$) between pornography use and level of flirtatiousness was found.

Sexual Infidelity

The same researchers (Lambert et al., 2012) also studied the incidence of sexual infidelity among pornography users in exclusive romantic relationships. Infidelity was measured by the self-report of incidents of "hooking up," which is a casual sexual encounter without the expectation of future contact (Paul & Hayes, 2002). Previous researchers had used the same method (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011; Littleton, Tabernik, Canales, & Backstrom, 2009). Lambert and colleagues found a positive correlation ($r = 0.22$) between pornography use and the number of hook-up partners.

Conclusion

Although much has been learned about the influence of pornography use in romantic relationships, much remains to be learned, particularly concerning pornography use's long-term effects on sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships. Additional longitudinal studies are needed. Specifically, further studies of the effects of pornography use on romantic partners' sexual satisfaction and fidelity as their physical attractiveness declines would be valuable.

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