

How pornography influences and harms sexual behavior

January 27 2015, by Brian Mcneill

A new article co-authored by a Virginia Commonwealth University professor suggests that pornography has become a primary source of sexual education, and has a tangible influence on the sex lives of young adults.

The researchers, including Jennifer Johnson, Ph.D., a professor in Department of Sociology of the College of Humanities and Sciences, surveyed 487 college men, ages 18 to 29, to compare their rate of pornography use with sexual preferences and concerns.

The article, "Pornography and the Male Sexual Script: An Analysis of Consumption and Sexual Relations," was published in the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, and was also authored by Chyng Sun, Ph.D., of New York University; Ana Bridges, Ph.D., of the University of Arkansas; and Matt Ezzell, Ph.D., of James Madison University.

Johnson recently discussed the team's findings about the effects of pornography, the societal impact of pornography, and why an "opt-in" system for Internet pornography might be needed.

According to your new research, in what ways is pornography affecting men and their views on sexuality?

My recent research reveals the way in which pornography can come to

dominate heterosexual men's sexual encounters with women.

Pornography is generally thought of as a solitary activity yet our research shows the more frequent viewing of the pornography is associated with greater reliance on and preference for the pornographic script during interpersonal sexual encounters. Our research shows, among college-aged heterosexual men, 51 percent masturbated to pornography several times per week, 19 percent use it several times per month and 13.5 percent use it daily. Men who watched more pornography deliberately conjured up pornographic images to maintain arousal during sex and preferred pornography over real-life sexual encounters. In other words, pornography is not mere fantasy for men; instead, it shapes how they engage in intimate behaviors.

In your view, is all pornography harmful?

There are a myriad health implications presented by the astronomical growth of Internet pornography in the last decade. First and foremost are the challenges to the health and safety of men and women who produce pornography. Sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and drug abuse, and violence are quite common among those in the industry. This should be a growing concern for college campuses as the production of pornography has become more dispersed with college campuses being cultivated as new production localities. This is especially relevant given the heightened attention to Title IV violations on college campuses. The Virginia Department of Health recognizes cultural ideologies which support gender inequality as a contributing factor to sexual violence. Pornography is a primary cultural tool for the reproduction of such ideologies.

While research is not able to show causality, something no social science research can do, pornography is strongly correlated with factors widely recognized as contributors to sexual violence including defining masculinity as embodied through violence, hostile attitudes towards

women, and gender inequality. Furthermore, the average age of first exposure to pornography is around 12 years of age and the pornography that is the cheapest and easiest to access contains very high rates of violence against women and promotes a degrading and dehumanizing form of sexuality for boys. Boys and men are the majority of consumers of such pornography, making it the dominant sexual framework to which boys are socialized and to which girls, as sexual partners, must respond. Therefore, discussions, both in high school and colleges, about sexual health and healthy relationships should include a dialogue about the consumption and use of pornography.

One of the reasons why pornography is generally overlooked as a sexual health issue is the generation gap created by Internet pornography. The term pornography generally conjures up images of a pizza delivery guy arriving at the house of a sexually aroused housewife or girl next door. However, the Internet has significantly reshaped the content of pornography. Now, the most popular and easily accessible forms of pornography contain significant amounts of violence, degradation and humiliation of women, are short, and focused almost exclusively on genitalia. Many adults, who are beyond the years of sexual development and exploration and who developed their sexual identities prior to the Internet, have not encountered the new sexual scripts Internet pornography is inscribing on the sexual identities of younger people. Thus, there is a significant gap in how older and younger adults understand what constitutes pornography, which leaves older adults less prepared to help guide sexual choices.

Does your research have implications for the larger society, particularly given the pervasiveness of Internet pornography?

Pornography is a global economic industry that produces a product with

implications for human health and social well-being. The processes of production and consumption involve a global supply chain, which includes connections to human trafficking, [child pornography](#), prostitution, drugs and other forms of global violence. It economically feeds mainstream businesses including large hotel chains, cable companies, major technology companies, media production companies and even Wall Street. Pornography is more than a personal choice related to speech, expression or sexuality. It is a global industry that trades on the bodies of men, women and children for profit. It is the public face of a larger network of sexual exploitation which deliberately recruits from foster homes, shelters serving various desperate populations and otherwise seeks out poor people from across the world to feed a supply chain with a constant need for fresh bodies due to the level of physical punishment and degradation associated with the production of pornographic material.

Do you support any sort of public policy change regarding pornography? Do you think it should be banned, or limited?

Challenges to the pornography industry should be primarily implemented on the production side of the economic equation and should focus on enhancing the protection of those in the sex trade, including but not limited to legal protections to ensure fair remuneration and access to high quality health care; enforcement of all OSHA regulations to promote a safe working environment, especially as it pertains to bodily fluid exchange such as semen or blood; and protection from sexual violence by arresting and prosecuting perpetrators. Furthermore, more criminal justice and regulatory attention needs to be paid to the ways in which the pornography industry promotes and supports human trafficking, which in the United States includes targeted recruitment from foster homes and shelters.

On the demand side of the equation, I support the "opt-in" policy, which requires Internet subscribers to ask for pornographic material to be accessible rather than the current "opt-out" system which assumes the delivery of pornographic material is acceptable unless otherwise filtered. I also support stronger sexual education at middle and high schools and colleges to include a discussion on the role of pornography in sexual health. This discussion needs to include parents who are often unaware of the content of the pornography their children are watching.

This most recent article focuses on pornography's effects on men specifically. Has similar research been conducted on its effects on women? Do you think pornography has a similar effect on women?

The growth of online pornography as a means of sexual expression is a complicated issue for women, whose bodies have historically been rigidly controlled by restrictive sexual norms and practices. Online pornography offers an accessible way to seemingly resist and challenge such restrictions. However, because online pornography is dominated by an industry with economic interests in the control of women's bodies, the sexual expression offered by the pornography industry is produced through a supply chain built on the trade and disposal of other women's bodies for male pleasure and profit. The pornography industry does not emancipate women from restrictive sexual practices; instead it repackages sexual control as a commercial product and markets it to women as a form of sexual choice. Thus online pornography presents dissonant messages to women—pornography is marketed to women as sexual empowerment but the content is violent and dehumanizing, particularly to the women who are in the industry.

Our next article, currently out for review, explores the cognitive dissonance embedded in women's relationship to pornography. Results

indicate that while a majority of women have seen pornography (87 percent), most (52 percent) reported no current consumption. Among those who did report current pornography use, consumption was associated with increased incorporation of and reliance on pornographic sexual scripts during dyadic sexual encounters as well as increased concerns over sexual performance and body image. We conclude pornographic scripts create a heuristic model of sexuality most women avoid but, among those who do engage with the script, the impact was very similar to that of men.

What led to your interest in this topic?

My interest in this topic springs from a unique background in feminist theory and work with the Department of Defense. My academic research focused on the reproduction of gender through the domestic division of labor in heterosexual households. As a feminist scholar, I was interested in how gender ideology shaped interpersonal relationships and how men and women felt about the role of gender in their daily lives. I also spent three years working as a social science analyst for the Department of Defense, where I developed research methodologies using social network analysis. When I returned to academia, I used social network analysis to begin mapping the political economy of the online commercial pornography industry. It was through this research that I began to understand the size and scope of the industry and its implications for sexual health, particularly among adolescents and emerging adults.

What will you be working on next?

I have two concurrent ongoing research projects. One is to continue to explore the role of pornography in interpersonal relationships by examining the types of pornography viewed and associations with sexual

behavior in dyadic [sexual encounters](#). In other words, are people who watch more violent pornography more likely to engage in violent sexual activities during sex with a partner? My other project involves building a social network analysis software tool to map and measure the network of the online commercial [pornography](#) industry. I want to explore the size, scope and interconnections of the online industry to reveal the way in which the industry provides cover for other dimensions of sexual exploitation.

More information: Pornography and the Male Sexual Script: An Analysis of Consumption and Sexual Relations, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, December 2014. link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-014-0391-2

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