

Effects of Pornography

Pornography changes the [habits of the mind](#), the inner private self. Its use can easily become habitual, which in turn leads to desensitization, boredom, distorted views of reality, and an [objectification of women](#). There are also numerous clinical consequences to pornography use, including increased risk for significant physical and mental health problems and a greater likelihood of committing a [sex-based crime](#).

1. Effects on the Mind, Body, and Soul

The “digital revolution” has led to great strides in productivity, communication, and other desirable ends, but pornographers also have harnessed its power for their profit. The cost has been a further weakening of the nation’s citizens and families, a development that should be of grave concern to all. The social sciences demonstrate the appropriateness of this concern.

Two reports, one by the American Psychological Association on hyper-sexualized girls, and the other by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy on the pornographic content of phone texting among teenagers, make clear that the digital revolution is being used by younger and younger children to dismantle the barriers that channel sexuality into family life.¹⁾

Pornography, as a [visual \(mis\)representation of sexuality](#), distorts an individual’s concept of sexual relations by objectifying them, which, in turn, alters both sexual attitudes and behavior. It is a major threat to marriage, to family, to children, and to individual happiness.

Social scientists, clinical psychologists, and biologists have begun to clarify some of the social and psychological effects of pornography, and neurologists are beginning to delineate the biological mechanisms through which pornography produces its powerful effects on people.

Pornography’s power to undermine individual and social functioning is powerful and deep:

- **Effect on the Mind:** Pornography significantly distorts attitudes and perceptions about the nature of sexual intercourse. Men who habitually look at pornography have a higher tolerance for abnormal [sexual behaviors](#), sexual aggression, promiscuity, and even [rape](#). In addition, men begin to view women and even children as “sex objects,” commodities or instruments for their pleasure, not as persons with their own inherent dignity.
- **Effect on the Body:** [Pornography is very addictive](#). The addictive aspect of pornography has a biological substrate, with dopamine hormone release acting as one of the mechanisms for forming the transmission pathway to pleasure centers of the brain. Also, the increased [sexual permissiveness](#) engendered by pornography increases the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or of being an unwitting parent in an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.
- **Effect on the Heart:** Pornography affects people’s emotional lives. [Married men](#) who are involved in pornography feel less satisfied with their marital sexual relations and less emotionally attached to their wives. [Women married to men with a pornography addiction](#) report feelings of betrayal, mistrust, and anger. Pornographic use may lead to infidelity and even divorce. [Adolescents who view pornography](#) feel shame, diminished self-confidence, and sexual uncertainty.

2. Desensitization, Habituation, and Boredom

Prolonged use of pornography produces habituation,²⁾ boredom, and sexual dissatisfaction among **female and male viewers**,³⁾ and is associated with more lenient views of extramarital sexual relations and recreational attitudes toward sex.⁴⁾ A 2000 study of college freshmen found that the habitual use of pornography led to greater tolerance of sexually explicit material, thus requiring more novel and bizarre material to achieve the same level of arousal or interest.⁵⁾ For example, habituation may lead to watching “depictions of group sex, sadomasochistic practices, and sexual contact with animals,”⁶⁾ engaging in anal intercourse,⁷⁾ and trivializing “nonviolent forms of the sexual abuse of children.”⁸⁾

The pornography industry adapted to this desire for more bizarre and uncommon images. An analysis of the content of Playboy, Penthouse, and Hustler from the years 1953 to 1984 revealed 6,004 child images and an additional 14,854 images depicting crime or violence. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of the child images were sexual and violent, with most of the images displaying girls between the ages of three and eleven years of age. Each of these magazines portrayed the scenes involving children as though the child had been unharmed by the sexual scene or even benefited from it.⁹⁾

Heavy exposure to pornography leads men to judge their mates as sexually less attractive,¹⁰⁾ resulting in less satisfaction with their affection, physical appearance, and sexual behavior.¹¹⁾ The need for more intense sexual stimulation brought on by pornography can lead to boredom in normal relationships and a greater likelihood of seeking sexual pleasure outside of marriage. Repeated exposure to pornography leads the viewer to consider “recreational sexual engagements” as increasingly important,¹²⁾ and changes the viewer to being very accepting of sexual permissiveness.¹³⁾

3. Distorted Perception of Reality

Pornography presents sexual access as relentless, “a sporting event that amounts to innocent fun” with inconsequential effects on emotions, perceptions, and health.¹⁴⁾ This is not the case, however. Pornography leads to distorted perceptions of social reality: an exaggerated perception of the level of sexual activity in the general population,¹⁵⁾ an inflated estimate “of the incidence of premarital and extramarital sexual activity, as well as increased assessment of male and female promiscuity,” “an overestimation of almost all sexual activities performed by sexually active adults,”¹⁶⁾ and an overestimation of the general prevalence of perversions such as group sex, bestiality, and sadomasochistic activity.¹⁷⁾ Thus, the beliefs being formed in the mind of the viewer of pornography are far removed from reality. A case could be made that repeated viewing of pornography induces a mental illness in matters sexual.

These distortions result in an acceptance of three beliefs: (1) sexual relationships are recreational in nature, (2) men are generally sexually driven, and (3) women are sex objects or commodities.¹⁸⁾ These are called “permission-giving beliefs” because they result in assumptions that one’s behavior is normal, acceptable, and commonplace, and thus not hurtful to anyone else.¹⁹⁾ These beliefs are deepened and reinforced by masturbation while viewing pornography,²⁰⁾ a frequent practice among those who use pornography to deal with stress.²¹⁾

When male and female viewers do not believe that exposure to pornography has any effect upon their personal views or lives,²²⁾ they more readily internalize abnormal sexual attitudes and increase the likelihood that they will engage in perverse sexual behaviors.²³⁾

All of these distortions amount to a serious misunderstanding about sexuality and relationships and are a dangerous distortion of the nature of social life.²⁴⁾ Those who perceive pornographic sexual scenes as depicting reality tend to be more accepting of sexual permissiveness than others.²⁵⁾ Prolonged exposure to pornography fosters the belief that sexual inactivity constitutes a health risk.²⁶⁾

4. Sexually Transmitted Disease and Out of Wedlock Pregnancy

Since pornography encourages sexually permissive attitudes and behavior, users of pornography have a higher likelihood of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or fathering an [out-of-wedlock pregnancy](#). Pornography's frequent depiction of intercourse without condoms (87 percent of the time) is an invitation for the promiscuous to contract a sexually transmitted disease,²⁷⁾ to have a child out of wedlock and to have multiple sex partners.²⁸⁾ Pornography also promotes sexual compulsiveness, which doubles the likelihood of being infected with a sexually transmitted disease.²⁹⁾

5. Sexual Addiction

Pornography and "cybersex" are highly addictive and can lead to sexually compulsive behaviors (that decrease a person's capacity to perform other major tasks in life). Over 90 percent of therapists surveyed in one study believed that a person could become addicted to "cybersex."³⁰⁾ In an American survey, 57 percent of frequent viewers used online sexual activity to deal with stress.³¹⁾ A 2006 Swedish study of regular Internet pornography users found that about six percent were compulsive users and that these compulsives also used much more non-Internet pornography as well.³²⁾

Addictive pornography use leads to lower self-esteem and a weakened ability to carry out a meaningful social and work life. A survey of pornography addicts found that they disliked the "out of control" feeling and the time consumption that their pornography use engendered. All of the sexual compulsives reported they had felt distressed and experienced impairment in an important aspect of their lives as a result of their addiction. Almost half of the sexual compulsives said their behavior had significant negative results in their social lives, and a quarter reported negative effects on their job.³³⁾ In another survey, sexual compulsives and sexual addicts were 23 times more likely than those without a problem to state that discovering online sexual material was the worst thing that had ever happened in their life.³⁴⁾ No wonder then that severe clinical depression was reported twice as frequently among Internet pornography users compared to non-users.³⁵⁾

6. Aggression and Abuse

Intense use of pornography is strongly related to sexual aggression,³⁶⁾ and among frequent viewers of pornography, there is a marked increase in sexual callousness, including the "[rape myth acceptance](#)."³⁷⁾

A significant portion of pornography is violent in content. A study of different pornographic media found violence in almost a quarter of magazine scenes, in more than a quarter of video scenes, and in almost half (over 42 percent) of online pornography. A second study found that almost half the violent Internet scenes included nonconsensual sex.³⁸⁾

The data suggest “a modest connection between exposure to pornography and subsequent behavioral aggression,”³⁹⁾ though when men consume violent pornography (i.e. depicting rape or torture), they are more likely to commit acts of sexual aggression.⁴⁰⁾ Dangerously, pornography strongly affects psychotic men, who are more likely to act out their impulses.⁴¹⁾

Consumption of nonviolent pornography also increases men’s self-acknowledged willingness to force compliance with their particular sexual desires on reluctant partners.⁴²⁾ And though there are conflicting data on the relative effects of violent versus non-violent pornography,⁴³⁾ there is little doubt that the consumption of pornography leads to a significant increase in “rape myth acceptance,”⁴⁴⁾ which involves a reduction of sympathy with rape victims and a trivialization of rape as a criminal offense,⁴⁵⁾ a diminished concern about child sexual abuse, short of the rape of children,⁴⁶⁾ and an increased preparedness to resort to rape.⁴⁷⁾

One study at a rape crisis center interviewed 100 sexually abused women to determine if pornography played a role in any past incidences of sexual abuse. While 58 percent could not say, 28 percent stated that their abuser had in fact used pornography. Of this 28 percent (women who were aware that their abuser used pornography), 40 percent (or 11 percent of the total group) reported that pornography actually played a role in the abusive incident they experienced. In some cases, the abuser had watched pornography before abusing the woman, in one case he used pornography while committing the abuse, and in yet some other cases he forced his victim to participate in the making of a pornographic film.⁴⁸⁾

¹⁾ Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, American Psychological Association, Washington D.C., 2008 at <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualizationrep.pdf>; and: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy: “SEX And TECH, Results from a survey of teens and young adults,” Washington D.C., 2008 at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/SEXTECH/PDF/SexTech_Summary.pdf.

²⁾ Dolf Zillman, Indiana University, Paper prepared for the Surgeon General’s Workshop on Pornography and Public Health, Arlington VA, 1986. Available at http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/NN/B/C/K/V/_/nnbckv.pdf. Accessed April 23, 2012.

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