

Teen Pornography: An Emerging Mental Health Challenge

Journal of Psychosexual Health

5(1) 30–34, 2023

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DOI: 10.1177/26318318231154230

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Abstract

Exposure to pornography is not an uncommon and unusual phenomenon in the digital era, with teens being no exception. Exposure to pornography among teens may happen accidentally, out of curiosity, or intentionally to derive sexual excitement. Many individuals exposed to pornography may later develop pornography addiction. Most parents who are aware that their children view pornography are often worried about such behavior and sometimes seek help from mental health professionals. So, it can be certainly said that exposure to pornography among teens may cause significant distress in them and their parents. As pornography is a major source of sex education for a large number of teens, lots of myth and misguided information are harbored from watching pornography. This article focuses on the mental health aspects of pornography exposure among teens and the possible remedial measures.

Keywords

Teens, adolescents, pornography, mental health

Introduction

The advent of the Internet was also associated with the growing popularity of sexually explicit content available online. Worldwide, it's estimated that the pornography industry earned roughly 97 billion dollars in revenue in 2021.¹ The available research to understand the clinical and sexual implications of exposure to pornography, both during adolescence and as an adult, has produced contrasting results.^{2,3} The teenage years are a period of growth and exploration, usually sexual, as children move to experience pubertal growth and sexual spurt due to hormonal changes. The strong link between media exposure and increased adoption of the sexual scripts by adolescents, changing their perception and attitudes around sex, has been studied.⁴

Pornography—Etymological Origin

The word pornography was coined from 3 Greek words (*porne* meaning “prostitute,” *graphein* which refers to the

“act of recording or writing,” derived meaning is “illustration” and *ia* meaning “a state of” or “a property of”), which together means the illustration or description of prostitutes or prostitution.⁵ French literature has some of the earliest mentions in the 1800s of the word “*pornographia*.”^{6,7} It was then used in the English language to refer to include all forms of “non-offensive and bookish terms for describing prostitutes” and later on encompassed the more modern connotation of “any form of objectionable material in art and literature.”^{6,7} In the modern day and age, there have been interdisciplinary disagreements between the usage of the word porn and defining it. A Delphi panel has recently published 2 agreed forms of defining pornography, one of which is “*sexually explicit materials intended to arouse*.”⁸

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Consumers of Teen Pornography

A study analyzing the motivational basis for adolescents indulging in watching pornography included “sexual pleasure, sexual curiosity, emotional distraction or suppression, stress reduction, fantasy, boredom avoidance, lack of sexual satisfaction, and self-exploration” as the major factors for watching pornographic content. However, the motivations leading to problematic pornography use (PPU) included all of the above except sexual curiosity and self-exploration.⁹

On consideration of social variables after doing a 6 year longitudinal study on 3291 Chinese adolescents, it was found that usually male adolescents with poor family dynamics, peer pressure, desire for popularity, and victims of online and offline bullying were more prone to higher pornography use.¹⁰ It is believed that sensation-driven, thrill-seeking, impulsive, delinquent adolescents with low self-control liked to engage in porn watching.¹¹

Psychological trauma including sexual abuse, parental abuse, broken marriages, childhood porn exposure, and cyber-bullying, all played a role.¹² In terms of parenting style, both authoritarian and permissive parents lead to decreased reliability and utilization of available media resources, thereby increasing pornographic usage, whereas authoritative parents do better in promoting good sexual practices.¹³ A study assessing the dispositional, developmental, and social variables associated with high porn viewing in school students in Spain found that “being male, older, bisexual or with an undefined sexual orientation, substance use, not being Muslim, higher sexual interest and use of social media to obtain sexual information” increased the odds. Religiosity was associated with decreased porn viewing, especially in male adolescents.¹⁴ Apart from parenting style, higher socio-economic status, healthy family dynamics, and greater attachment to school were some of the other reported protective factors.¹⁵

Consequences of Watching Pornography

Most of the research on adolescents is anonymous and cross-sectional, which has both clinical and research generalization limitations. However, large-scale longitudinal analysis faces the limitations of ethicality and a controlled environment that does not emulate real-life implications. Taking into account all these factors in different types of users, some authors have classified individuals into porn abstainers, auto-erotic porn users, and complex porn users.¹⁶ Boys and girls have been classified differently by some, depending on their trajectories. Boys are divided into non-use or infrequent use, strongly increased use, occasional use, and decreasing use types. In girls, the 3 trajectories were stable non-use or infrequent use, strongly increasing use, and stable occasional use.¹⁷ Some researchers also simplistically divide porn viewing into intentional and unintentional exposure. There are frequent pop-up advertisements that are posted on other sites which can lead to unintentional viewing spam emails,¹⁸ nonintentional mistyping of websites or words, or using

words with sexual meanings.¹⁹ Intentional viewing, on the other hand, is deliberate and purposeful.²⁰

Apart from the variable classification, demographic information is also variable. The association of porn watching with age has produced contrasting results; however, most have found an association between early exposure and more frequent use later in life.²¹ In another study, comparing high and low pornography viewing over a 4-wave longitudinal analysis, at every half-year interval, it was found that high porn using boys were substantially larger as compared to that of girls and pornography consumption was associated with the accelerated growth of sexual activities for both genders across early and middle adolescence.²²

On behavioral changes, a study by Braithwaite et al, after longitudinal assessment, showed that students who watched pornography more usually promoted more permissive scripts, were involved more in casual dating and “one-night stands,” had a higher incidence of “friends with benefits” behavior, hooked up often with their sexual partners,²³ and had planned to have more sexual partners in the future.²⁴ However, a similar study on Croatian adults did not reveal more risk-taking behaviors pointing to the cultural and social context of the interpretation.²⁵

Most studies did not encompass the entire gender spectrum. In general, these studies have revealed a gender-wise disparity, reporting that girls are usually the less frequent viewers. However, that does not hold for studies done in developed nations. For instance, a study done on Swedish girls revealed that there was rising consumerism of pornography in females, especially from liberal countries.²⁶ One-third of the girls reported viewing pornography, 43% had fantasies regarding trying to copy sexual acts seen in pornography, and 39% of them had tried to copy the sexual activities they had seen in pornography.²⁶ It was reported that promiscuity and risky behavior were reported more in porn consuming population than in their peers. On the other hand, the study done in the conservative Arab society has revealed that although male adolescents were exposed to pornography and their mothers are cognizant of the fact, for females it is an unholy sin with mothers denying that their girls ever watched porn. The females themselves opined that they had never viewed it but had seen their friends do it. The religiosity and moral incongruence seem to play a big role in infrequent usage for boys; however, strict and conservative rules for girls played a greater role.²⁷

In addition, a multinational study done across 5 countries including China, Indonesia, Belgium, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ecuador found that porn watching was heavily gendered. Pornography was consistently more common among boys than that among girls in all sites ($P < .05$), ranging from 21.9% (Ecuador) to 51.28% (Belgium) among boys and from 6.59% (Ecuador) to 20.64% (China) among girls. Adolescents who engaged in romantic relationships and who believed that their friends were sexually active had higher pornography exposure. In Shanghai, China, gender stereotypical roles and in Indonesia, gender stereotypical traits were associated with higher pornography use in boys. For girls, the sexual double

standards in which different perceptions for both the genders are kept was the only gender norm perception associated with pornography use.²⁸ Limited studies have pointed out that bisexual and gay adolescents were more frequent porn users than their straight peers.¹⁴

The Darker Side of Online Pornography

The major issue with online pornography is that it is unregulated and studies have pointed out that as compared to traditional forms, online pornography has much more violent, unnatural, and depicts extreme forms of sexuality which increases the chances of these behaviors getting imprinted on impressionable minds of adolescents.²⁹ The online chat rooms and blogs reinforce and promote the idea. The major issue with the cognitive development of adolescents is that they might not be able to differentiate between “reel life” and “real life,” in turn promoting problematic sexual behavior. Adolescents engaging in sex and sexually abusive behavior usually have the common linkage between early pornography exposure and maltreatment.³⁰ It was also reported that sexting, especially nonconsensual sexting (ie, forwarding a sexually explicit picture of a dating partner, relationship partner, friend, stranger or ex-partner) was associated with pornography use.³¹

Pornography promotes gender stereotyping and reinforces the idea of the submissive female gender. Teen dating violence (physical, sexual, and threatening) was found to be heavily influenced by exposure to violent pornography. It promotes the victimization of females in sexually abusive relationships where males are usually the perpetrators (assessed by rape myth expectance, suspension, substance abuse, and gender equitable attitude).³² Studies have reported behavioral changes in adolescents as a consequence of watching pornography including the adoption of unsafe sexual practices.³³ Rapes, violent crimes, and sexual assaults are frequently reported to be higher in adolescents who spent greater time viewing sexually explicit content. Teen pregnancies as a result of unsafe sexual practices emulating the online content have been reported.³⁴ Teenage pregnancies in underdeveloped and developing countries on the other hand are due to lack of knowledge, financial resources, wherein the marriage is usually a result of financial transaction between parents and the groom and pornographic content availability for minors.³⁵

As these teenagers enter adulthood they also start building dysfunctional relationships and problematic pornography viewing (PPV). PPV is associated with dysregulation, habits of use, and moral incongruence.³⁶ Individuals with psychiatric illnesses such as depression, anxiety, narcissistic personality disorder, and self-regulation deficits have higher chances of developing PPV.^{37,38}

Directions for Change

1. **Controlling parental reactions:** To bring about changes, first parents have to think carefully about the

directions. Most parents feel awkward while talking about sex or are numb to explore these topics with their children.¹³ However, the first reaction of anger and wrath, and physical abuse on adolescents, after finding out that adolescents do watch pornography, especially in conservative societies, needs attention. Resorting to punishments can further isolate them. Parents need to find composure and talk with adolescents openly and honestly about their online activities. It is also important that parents themselves are cognizant of their online surfing.³⁹

2. **Role of child psychologists and pediatric nurse practitioners:** In developed countries, pediatric nurse practitioners take the role of educating adolescents and stress limiting media usage for children so that they can explore their environment.³⁹ In developing countries, child psychologists can counsel adolescents about their PPV. In addition, sex education and awareness regarding pornographic content have proved to increase understanding and positive attitudes towards sex in adolescents who are going through this transition. It can also help in reducing gender and sexual stereotyping associated with pornography.⁴⁰
3. **Online resources, recommendations, and literacy programs:** There are several online resources available to teach about sex education in an age-appropriate manner and to make understood the effects of pornography.^{39,41} Peer-led media literacy programs associated with teaching appropriate sexual behavior are associated with delayed initiation of sexual activity, more awareness of myths around sex, and better understanding of media portrayal of sex.³⁵
4. **Role of family and school:** In addition, schools especially in developing and conservative societies can play a role in initiating the understanding. Comprehensive sex education programs need to be developed along with PNPs or child psychologists or other mental health practitioners regarding internet literacy and principles of healthy intimate relationships.⁴² Families and schools can play a pivotal role in promoting sexual well-being and help them understand the difference between reality and their perceived reality.⁴³ School literacy programs centered around pornography have also improved the knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural intentions related to pornography. There were no adverse effects associated with it as feared in most conservative societies.⁴⁴
5. **PPV and mental health of adolescents:** It is virtually impossible to always regulate the content available for viewing, an environment needs to be made to make sure that adolescents can confide in someone trusted and trained to handle such situations, and school counsellors need to have the proper training to deal with them. In addition, adolescents having PPV (frequency, impulsivity, disrupting school) will also need a referral to a mental health specialist which comprises a team

of both child psychiatrists and child psychologists. It is important to have access to local mental health resources and develop these resources, especially in developing countries and societies.³⁹

Conclusion

Teen pornography is an emerging and rapidly spreading phenomenon, many teen reports about adverse consequences of watching pornography. It is almost impossible to completely stop the exposure to pornography in teens in this digital era; however, the harmful consequences associated with it can be minimized significantly in large number of teens through adoption of appropriate strategies.

Author Contributions

The conception and planning were jointly done by SKK and SC. The original write-up was developed by SC. The write-up was evaluated and revised by SKK.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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