

Effects of Pornography Addiction on Families and Communities

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Over the last three decades the status of pornography in the American entertainment marketplace has been radically transformed and expanded. Production and distribution of such materials has rapidly evolved from a “cottage industry” to a stable and well-refined mass-production enterprise. Spurred by new digital communication technologies, the marketplace for pornography has changed from one tailored to a subculture of connoisseurs into a mass market offering prolific content availability and diversity (cf., Weaver, 1994).

Research on Effects of Pornography Addiction

It is against this backdrop that the question at hand – what is the impact of pornography addiction on families and communities? – is framed. Unfortunately, research directly assessing the impact of pornography addiction on families and communities is limited. However, it seems reasonable to expect – especially in this age of “cybersex” – that the compulsive and/or obsessive use of pornography could precipitate economic and social repercussions for individual consumers, their families and coworkers, and the broader community.

Fortunately, there is a large body of social science research evidence that can inform our discussion (Weaver, 1994). The manifest content of pornography has been extensively examined, for example, revealing that (1) pornography’s dominant theme is one of unrestrained human sexual promiscuity and (2) it’s devoid of coercion and violent action (Brosius, Weaver, & Staab, 1994). Further, the findings of numerous studies suggest that pornography consumption promotes sexual deviancy, sexual perpetration, and adverse sexual attitudes (cf. Oddone-

Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2000). Of this research, a series of studies demonstrating the effects of pornography within a repeated-exposure, delayed-measurement experimental paradigm are particularly illuminating for the question at hand (Zillmann, 2004).

Experimental Evidence: Repeated-Exposure to Pornography

The repeated-exposure, delayed-measurement paradigm simulates pornography consumption under relatively realistic conditions (i.e., daily or weekly exposure over an extended period of time) and then delays impact assessments for days and weeks to rule out any transitory effects. The paradigm thus may be considered an empirical surrogate for the phenomenon of pornography addiction in that it is sensitive to both (1) the consequences of cumulative exposure and (2) the formation of chronic effects.

Research employing this repeated-exposure paradigm has been conducted with both men and women drawn from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in the United States and Canada and has used pornography explicitly depicting all conceivable sexual activities devoid of violence performed among consenting adults. The findings are best summarized around the following themes: (1) Immediate reactions, (2) perceptions of sexuality, (3) sexual callousness, (4) rape proclivity, (5) family values and desire for progeny, and (6) sexual satisfaction.

Immediate Reactions

(a) Initial reactions of emotional discomfort and disgust dissipate rapidly with repeated exposure to pornography, eventually vanishing entirely.

(b) Initial hesitations to enjoy the material are rapidly lost with repeated exposure and give way to unadulterated reactions of enjoyment.

(c) Prolonged consumption of pornography eventually produces sexual and, more generally, excitatory habituation as well as boredom.

(d) Prolonged exposure to pornography stimulates a preference for depictions of group sex, sadomasochistic practices, and sexual contact with animals.

Perceptions of Sexuality

(a) Prolonged exposure to pornography leads to an overestimation of almost all sexual activities performed by sexually active adult.

(b) Prolonged exposure to pornography fosters increased estimates of the incidence of pre- and extramarital sexual activity, as well as increased assessments of male and female promiscuity.

(c) Prolonged exposure to pornography thither leads to the related perception of less honesty and trust, specific to covert sexual engagements, among intimates.

(d) Prolonged exposure to pornography fosters and strengthens the belief that promiscuous behavior is healthy, whereas sexual repression constitutes a health risk.

Sexual Callousness

(a) In men, prolonged exposure to pornography creates and enhances sexual callousness toward women.

(b) Prolonged exposure to pornography trivializes rape as a criminal offense. [Rape trivialization was ascertained in the lenient sentencing of convicted rapists. After prolonged exposure to pornography, men and unexpectedly also women, deemed rape a lesser offense.]

(c) Prolonged exposure to pornography trivializes nonviolent forms of the sexual abuse of children. [Effects were again measured in the lenient treatment of convicted perpetrators. Whereas all minor abuses, such as genital fondling and sexual cooperation in the absence of vigorous objection, were met with greater leniency, the brutal rape of children was not.]

Rape Proclivity

(a) Prolonged exposure to pornography increases men's self-acknowledged rape proclivity. Both noncoercive and coercive sexual displays have this effect.

(b) Psychoticism exacerbates the influence of pornography on men's rape proclivity. Psychotic men are strongly affected, whereas men with minimal psychotic inclination are not.

Family Values and Desire for Progeny

(a) Prolonged exposure to pornography spawns doubts about the value of marriage as an essential social institution and about its future viability.

(b) It also diminishes the desire for offspring in such settings. The strongest effect of this kind concerns the aspiration of female viewers for female children.

Sexual Satisfaction

(a) Prolonged exposure to pornography fosters sexual dissatisfaction among both male and female viewers.

(b) It also fosters, although to a lesser degree, dissatisfaction with an intimate partner's affection.

Conclusions

Taken together, the research at hand establishes that prolonged consumption of pornography – a critical condition presumably underlying pornography addiction – is a significant contributing factor in the creation of perceptions, dispositions, and behaviors that reflect sexual callousness, the erosion of family values, and diminished sexual satisfaction. Generalizing from these findings, we can anticipate that the compulsive and/or obsessive use of pornography should produce adverse consequences for individual consumers, their families and coworkers, and the broader community.

Consideration of the pragmatic implications of the research evidence at hand suggests, first of all, that the distorted messages of unrestrained human sexual promiscuity conveyed by pornography could be, as others have argued, a potent catalyst for abusive behaviors such as domestic violence and rape. Prolonged exposure to pornography, it must be remembered, results in both a “loss-of-respect” for female sexual autonomy and the disinhibition of men in the expression of aggression against women. Extensive research evidence shows that these two factors are prominent interwoven components in the perceptual profiles of sexually abusive and aggressive individuals.

A second implication concerns the extent to which pornography-induced misogynistic perceptions negatively influence the welfare of women in everyday, nonsexual circumstances. Repeated-exposure to pornography, the data reveal, fostered acceptance of the notion that women are subservient to men and promoted an adversarial, distrustful relationship between the sexes. Many voices have suggested that the most damaging consequences of prolonged consumption of pornography are evident in the ill treatment of women (e.g., employment discrimination, economic exploitation) simply because of their gender.

Finally, there is reason to suspect that pornography –with its seemingly factual, documentary-style presentation of sexual behaviors –has usurped most other socialization agents to become the de facto sex education for adolescents and adults alike. Thus, the likelihood persists that the main messages of pornography have a stronger influence on the formation of sexual dispositions, including coercive disposition, than alternative forms of sexual indoctrination. Within this framework, the desirability of pornography as a rudimentary “educator” about sex must be contemplated.

References

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