

LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

SELF-PRESENTATION, NETWORKING, PLAYING, AND PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS

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The Educational Dimension of Pornography: Adolescents' Use of New Media for Sexual Purposes

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we discuss the role of online pornography use in adolescents' sexual lives, and its effects on young internet users. The review of research indicates that online pornography may have a multifaceted function. While the most common definition of pornography stems from its purposeful intention to increase sexual arousal, there is emerging evidence that adolescents deliberately access these materials online not only for sexual arousal but also for sex education. Furthermore, we show how the line between pleasure and sex self-education can be blurred. Thanks to online pornography use, adolescents may learn what sexually excites them and how they respond to various sexual stimuli. Finally, we argue that online pornography should not be framed by negative discourse suggesting that it is unsuitable for adolescents. The positive value of online pornography use seems to be worth considering when providing the younger generations with sex education.

Keywords

youth, sexual explicit material, sex education, internet

INTRODUCTION

In June 2013, Google Glass, a wearable computer with a head-mounted display, was still a year away from mass market consumer release (Li, 2013). But the app development company, MiKandi, had already unveiled the first Google Glass app for viewing pornography (Oremus, 2013). Called "Tits and Glass," the app would allow Google Glass users to see pornography discretely, and it amassed over 10,000 hits on its website in its first day, inspiring a flurry of articles discussing its controversial release in newspapers, magazines, and blogs. The relationship between pornography and technology, already long and close, had just taken a step forward.

Although the coupling of pornography and technology is nothing new, the advent of the internet has brought with it new levels of availability, affordability, anonymity, acceptability, and aloneness (Barak & Fisher, 2001). In particular, new digital media has changed the way we interact with pornography; we can now use our internet-capable mobile phones to access pornographic websites, forums, video sharing services, and apps. According to findings from the EU Kids Online II survey, it is apparent that online platforms are among the most accessed sources of sexual materials, with 14% of adolescents aged 9–16 using technology compared with 12% who viewed these materials on television, films, or video/DVD, and the 7% who viewed sexual materials in magazines or books (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). However, thanks to the explosion of handheld devices, one can reach pornographic content in a moment's notice on the go during the commute, at home, in private, or amongst friends or partners. New media has changed the experience and social context of pornography.

This is especially true for the digital generation or so-called digital natives, those adolescents who have grown up using the internet and its new interactive social media (Székely & Nagy, 2011). Having learned to type on keyboards and touch screens at an early age, today's young people have become skilled internet users with a unique relationship to digital media. It is both a reality and a priority for adolescents to use the internet in their daily lives (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). Adolescence is also a period of development associated with sexual maturation, exploration, and risk-taking, and young people in their teenage years are likely to be interested in gathering sexual experiences and information (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Ševčíková & Konečný, 2011; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). With their reliance on the internet, it has become an ideal place for young people from different corners of the world to seek out sexual content without having to broach the intimate subject with family, friends, or educators (Kendall, 2012; Moran, 2000). Indeed, adolescents report accessing online pornography both intentionally and unintentionally (Dombrowski, Gischlar, & Durst, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). They use the internet to consume sexual content more than using other media sources, and they often consider sexual content on the internet to be their preferred use of viewing (Häggström-Nordin, Sandberg, Hanson, & Tydén, 2006; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011).

Research scholars are aware on adolescents' use of new media for sexual purposes, and in the last couple of decades there has been a significant amount of research conducted on online pornography consumption (for a review, see Döring,

2009). However, this subfield of online sexual activities (OSA) research has also overwhelmingly focused on the risks and negative consequences of adolescents' exposure to pornography, often problematizing adolescents' sexuality and internet usage. Furthermore, few studies have explored the potentially positive effects of adolescents' use of new media to access pornography, including why and how adolescents might consume such explicit sexual material. Yet, some insight comes from the sex education OSA subfield, where there is preliminary evidence that young people also use explicit online sexual material for beneficial sexual information and education (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). Thus, it is worth exploring the division of these two activities that are seemingly considered separate, with varied harmful and beneficial effects. The aim of this chapter is to examine the research on adolescents' use of online pornography, with an emphasis on the potentially positive connection between adolescents' use of pornography and sexual learning. Specifically, we aim to address questions about how adolescents use pornography, in which ways pornography can be educational, and how consuming pornographic content is interconnected with sex education. We will begin by discussing the academic definitions of pornography, then evaluate relevant research, and, in conclusion, determine which definition of pornography is most appropriate considering the findings in the field. We will also consider the consequences of regarding adolescents' use of online pornography as problematic and/or beneficial in a society that is becoming increasingly dependent on digital technology.

DEFINING PORNOGRAPHY

Our conception of pornography has important consequences for how we design and interpret studies about sexual content. It is important for researchers to establish a definition early in their investigations, and to keep it consistent throughout the research study, so that the meaning of the term can be communicated to participants and to the readers of any manuscripts. Such a strategy maximizes validity and aids in reliability. Unfortunately, pornography has not always been clearly defined in the research literature to date.

There has been disagreement and disappointment that pornography is so generally ill defined in the field (Rosser et al., 2012). Some studies have even adopted the phrase “sexually explicit material” or “sexually explicit media” (both abbreviated as SEM), instead of pornography in order to disassociate any discussed sexual content with existing political or negative connotations. However, most studies still appear to use the terms SEM and pornography interchangeably, which we will also do in this chapter (Hunt & Kraus, 2009; Luder, Pittet, Berchtold, Akre, Michaud, & Suris, 2011; Rosser et al., 2012).

For those studies that define SEM or pornography, most also associate the definition with both a type of content and a purpose. For example, Peter and Valkenburg (2011) define online pornography as “professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos (clips) on or from the internet that are intended to arouse the viewer” (p. 1015). Similarly, Morgan (2011) defines sexually explicit material as “media portraying images of exposed genitals and/or depictions of sexual behaviors that are intended to increase sexual arousal” (p. 520). Carroll, Padilla-Walker, Nelson, Olson, Barry, and Madsen (2008) also see pornography as being media that is purposefully intended to increase sexual arousal. Pornography is sexually explicit content, with slight variations in the type of content, intended to arouse and this conceptualization is consistent with other studies (Lo & Wei, 2005; McManus, 1986; Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012). There is some reliability, but pornography is narrowly understood as a tool to arouse the user. As we will discuss later in this chapter, this can be a limiting description as it excludes sexually explicit content that may hold a different purpose or it can be used for functions different than arousal, especially in adolescence.

Few studies have defined pornography solely based on its content and not its purpose. For instance, Goodson, McCormick, and Evans (2001) defined SEM as materials “that either show clear pictures of, or talk/write about sexuality using sexual vocabulary” (p. 105). While this appears to be a definition that does not stipulate a defined purpose, the authors explain “the phrases ‘use of the internet for viewing sexually explicit materials’ and ‘use of the internet for sexual entertainment’ will be used interchangeably throughout the text.” Ultimately, this ties SEM to an entertainment function, which may exclude more arousing, social, or educational uses. However, Haggström-Nordin et al. (2006) defined SEM more openly as “meaning textual, visual, or aural material that depicts sexual behaviors or acts, or that exposes the reproductive organs of the human body” (p. 386). Definitions lacking a specific purpose can also be found in studies employing adolescents that were conducted by Peter and Valkenburg (2009) and Braun-Courville and Rojas (2009). Ultimately, it is this more general and content-based definition that we will employ going forward as it keeps the purpose and use of pornography open to new research findings and broader interpretation. This also allows us to discuss different pornography as holding varied functions, especially when used by young internet users, such as adolescents.

THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF PORNOGRAPHY

To date, the focus of the literature has been on investigating the negative effects of adolescents’ use of new media for sexual purposes (Döring, 2009). The use of

pornography at a young age has been tied to feelings of depression and anxiety, stereotypical and negative body image, sexual callousness, the adoption of less progressive gender role attitudes, more permissive sexual norms, sexual activity, and even risky sex (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Lo & Well, 2005; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Mattebo, Larsson, Tydén, Olsson, & Häggström-Nordin, 2012; Philaretou, Maoufouz, & Allen, 2005; Zillmann, 2000).

Prior research has shown that the link between pornography use and negative outcomes is not straightforward, and instead it is conditioned by factors ranging from predispositions to cognitive, emotional, or excitative responses to sexual media (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). For instance, the liking of sexually explicit material or perceiving these materials as realistic leads to young internet users' perception of women as sex objects or the development of more recreational sexual attitudes (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). Similarly, the perceived utility of observed sexual material (e.g., sex on the internet gives you valuable information about sex) is associated with the adoption of more instrumental attitudes toward sex (e.g., sex is just a game or sex is primarily physical) (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010).

However, a closer look at research findings that document the socially undesirable outcomes of pornography use at a young age suggest that the main condition for the negative impact of sexually explicit materials on psychosexual development is frequent exposure to these materials. More precisely, heavy use of pornography, which is more common among boys than girls, precedes these unwelcome effects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010). This indicates that adolescents who are negatively affected are overwhelmed with or overexposed to pornography. This might lead to a lack of additional sources of sexual information that would balance the content mediated via pornography websites. However, not all adolescents are heavy users of online pornography and little seems to be known about their motives of consuming these materials (Ševčíková, Šerek, Macháčková, & Šmahel, 2013).

PORNOGRAPHY'S POSITIVE USES AND EFFECTS: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

Despite a field focused on the negative effects of online SEM use, there is now some research pointing to some positive effects associated with adolescents' use of online pornography. These findings are mainly borne out of in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with pornography users, which valuably allows those users to express their thoughts and feelings about SEM in their own words (Hardy, 1998). These feelings are often mixed and even critical

of the very pornography they find useful. The benefits of pornography use also do not appear to be universal; they can vary based on adolescents' age, gender, or sexual orientation. However, the initial evidence in the literature suggests some common benefits of online SEM.

Most definitions of pornography include the stipulation that its purpose is one of sexual arousal. Finding that pornography can be arousing in positive ways is supported by the literature. For example, Boies (2002) reported that 82% of a sample of college students found pornography sexually arousing. Increased sexual functioning and sexual pleasure was associated with positive opinions of pornography, particularly among male participants (Hald, 2006; Hald & Malamuth, 2008). Women have also positively connected pornography with feelings of arousal and that mainstream pornography gave them the feeling of being allowed to be more sexually active (Ciclitira, 1998). If the pornography was watched in the context of a sexual or romantic relationship, it could also be mutually arousing or exploratory (Smith, 2013; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). Young Swedish girls, with an average age of 17, expressed in focus groups that watching pornography with a partner could be inspirational or beautiful (Mattebo et al., 2012). Indeed, a social or emotional use of pornography can have a surprising benefit – one that may be separated or even connected to pornography's arousal function.

There is also evidence – in both the pornography and sex education OSA subfields – of SEM being used for informational purposes. It might be reasonable to expect that adolescents who undergo substantial psychosexual changes seek out pornography due to an insufficiency of formal sex education. However, there are few studies on the motives of online pornography use and their interconnection with the availability of formal sex education that would confirm this hypothesis (Kubicek, Beyer, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2010). In addition, studying this assumption is problematic due to cross-country differences in the content of curriculum-based sex education (Kirby, Laris, & Rolleri, 2007). Even though there is a trend that the formal sex education provided in Euro-American countries emphasize heterosexuality, the biology of reproductive organs, having sex for procreative reasons, and the privilege of abstinence, the lack of its quality may not be clearly associated with using the internet for educational reasons (Fields, 2008; Jarkovská & Lišková, 2013; Moran, 2000). For instance, even young adults from Sweden, the country known for its elaborate and long tradition of formal sex education, were found to treat the internet as a source of information about sexuality (Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2012). However, what seems to be clear is that, in comparison

to curriculum-based sex education, online pornography provides adolescents with qualitatively different information, which will be outlined later (Kubicek et al., 2010; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Smith, 2013).

Generally, a growing number of studies suggest that adolescents who use pornography more frequently are more likely to associate it with educational value and utility, even if it is also acknowledged to sometimes be unrealistic (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Lou, Cheng, Gao, Zuo, Emerson et al., 2012; Tsitsika, Critselis, Kormas, Konstantoulaki, Constantopoulos et al., 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010; Häggström-Nordin et al., 2006). Indeed, adolescents appear critical of the SEM that they consume; they are capable of acknowledging its positive functions while also understanding it to be stereotypical or objectifying (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Smith, 2013). Despite its shortcomings, online pornography is sought out by some adolescents because it might still be a valuable source of sexual information (Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). This result was also found in a study of online pornography use among Czech adolescents (ages 11–17) (Ševčíková & Daneback, 2014). More than one third of these adolescents accessed pornographic websites due to the need to learn something about sex; boys were twice as likely to do so.

Pornography was perceived as a more useful and anonymous source of information than magazines or formal school-based sex education (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Kubicek et al., 2010). Information about sexual acts and behaviors was the most common type of information cited by adolescents when asked about what they specifically had learned from pornography. Adolescents used pornography to find new sexual positions they could try later, and young Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) specifically cited pornography as a valuable way to learn about the mechanics of anal sex (Kubicek et al., 2010; Kubicek, Carpineto, McDavitt, Weiss, & Kipke, 2010; Mattebo et al., 2012). Additionally, in another study, men more than women viewed online pornography as being useful for generating sexual ideas, new techniques, and tricks, indicating a gender difference in this type of pornographic self-education (Smith, 2013). However, women reported finding sexually explicit material to be informational in a more abstract or general sense. Sexually explicit online text (sometimes referred to as erotica but fitting our definition of pornography) could allow women to learn about their sexuality alone and without needing a partner (Wilson-Kovacs, 2004; Attwood, 2005). It could also allow them to evaluate or learn about sexual behaviors without having to physically engage in them offline (Smith, 2013). Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson (2010) provide another example of the uniqueness of

information that adolescents can gain thanks to online pornography: watching sexual websites with their peers allowed them to observe their own and others' reactions to the actors' and actresses' behaviors, appearances, and bodies.

Apart from learning about sexual positions and specific behaviors from pornography, adolescents have also described learning more broadly about their own sexual desires from watching or engaging online SEM. For example, those young MSM who searched for information about anal sex or sex between men had meaningful experiences in the exploration of their own sexual orientation (Kubicek et al., 2010). Pornography might not be the best source of information – again, flaws like a general lack of realism, were acknowledged – but it could be accessed anonymously and privately and could provide self-education not often discussed in formal sex education curricula. Thus, pornography does not always have to be wholly realistic to provide adolescents with emotional and personally valuable sexual information. However, amateur pornography was seen by some as a better option for online sex self-education than more mainstream SEM (Smith, 2013); it was regarded as being more realistic and representative of offline sex. Women, in particular, discussed amateur pornography in terms of being liberating and even feminist, allowing women to learn about diverse sexual experiences and express their sexuality similarly in the offline world (Smith, 2013; Attwood, 2005; Ciclitira, 2004). Thus, the benefits drawn from pornography can be quite specific to the type of pornography in question and the user viewing or otherwise engaging with it; in other words, context matters. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the type of pornography adolescents access online remains largely unknown and future research should devote more attention to this issue.

BLURRING THE LINES: PORNOGRAPHY AS A SOURCE OF PLEASURE OR SEX SELF-EDUCATION?

We have described, despite researchers tending to sensationalize the negative effects of adolescents' use of online pornography, the positive aspects to SEM, including the educational value. Negative and positive uses of pornography can also intermingle; adolescents can think of pornography as being both positive – arousing, entertaining, etc. – and negative – possessing negative gender roles, a lack of realism, etc. – and it can still provide valuable educational information. This blurring of the line means that adolescents' sexual scripts for pornography may be more complex and context-specific than previously thought.

Gagnon and Simon's (2005) sexual scripts theory describes how we process sexual information, both culturally and individually. Our cultural sexual

scripts – metaphorical “how to” manuals for sexual behavior – are formed based on repeated exposure to cultural information; adolescents who continually encounter representations in the media depicting pornography as shameful tend to adopt this information themselves. It is also not uncommon for adolescents to begin to form sexual scripts in formal school-based sex education classes, where the curricula may set norms for what sexual information is acceptable to discuss or even what sexual positions or relationships are deemed normal. Even though there are attempts to change school-based sex education and expand the topics, pornography in sex education seems to still collocate with child pornography and other negative outcomes or it is perceived as a topic that should not be included in the curricula (Fifková et al., 2009; Rasmussen, Rofes, & Talburt, 2004; Weaver, Byers, Sears, Cohen, & Randall, 2001). However, the aforementioned body of research studies has shown how adolescents’ scripts can change when exposed to sexual information on the internet, including pornography. In this way, cultural scripts can shift over time when information changes in large-scale ways, which can happen quite quickly with interactive and social media. The amateur pornography movement is relatively new, yet adolescents already describe it as providing benefits that can differ from other types of pornography. In this way, our cultural sexual script for pornography may need to change in the research literature as well; going forward, it may be useful to see how pornography can be used for a variety of functions, not just sexual arousal, and how it can be interpreted based on its specific content and the users’ own needs and interests.

It is especially important that we revisit the cultural script attached to online pornography, considering that adolescents seem to be grappling with their own assessment of pornography. For female adolescents in Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson’s (2010) study, pornography was described as “creating ambivalence and different emotions, from arousal to fear and agony” (p. 45). Similarly, young men in the same study felt that pornography could hold a range of messages, inspire a number of different feelings, and ultimately make some people happy and others disgusted. Ambivalent feelings may develop based on adolescents’ feelings and differ depending on their use of pornography; they might feel positively about the information they learn yet negatively about their use of pornography for arousal or the content they are viewing. Indeed, when adolescents describe the functions of pornography as overlapping, this suggests a more complex sexual script than pornography being simply for arousal. Indeed, Smith (2013) interviewed a 19-year-old college student in the United States. She described her introduction to online pornography as such:

Once I felt like I kind of knew the basics [of anatomy] then I was just like this is fun anyway. You know it got me turned on and stuff so... I think when I first started looking [SEM] up, it was for information. I started using the pictures even for pleasure and masturbating and stuff. And then I got into the videos for kind of the same informational purposes and then going from there again into pleasure ... (p. 69–70)

She described how two different functional uses of pornography blended together. Pornography was not just about arousal; she also sought out SEM for sex self-education, and this could encompass different materials, including pictures and videos.

The findings from the qualitative study document how pornography enables adolescents to access not only practical information about how to have sex but also learning about what excites them. In other words, arousal as an outcome of watching pornography may include a component of sex self-education. In addition, the extent of information they receive from watching pornographic media seems to be even broader. Smith, Gertz, Alvarez, and Lurie (2000) found that 63% of websites adolescents encountered trying to find sexual health information was actually categorized as pornography. While it may be more likely that some websites are used for sexual arousal purposes and others for sexual health information, it is imprudent to think of these categories as mutually exclusive. What is, therefore, categorized as pornography – thereby being associated with more shameful and negative connotations – and what is categorized as sex education material – which can be positively promoted to adolescents – has important implications for sex educators, clinicians, parents, and adolescents themselves.

CONSEQUENCES

In a society where the sexual script surrounding adolescent sexuality has been one of fear, silence, and shame, it is a priority to shield young people from sexual content deemed inappropriate (Jarkovská & Lišková, 2013; Moran, 2000; Tarrant, 2010). This affects not only the official availability of pornographic websites, which adolescents under the age of 18 are supposed to avoid by clicking confirmation that they are not of legal age, but also the content of school-based sex education which seems to exclude pornography consumption from adolescent sexual life (Fifková et al., 2009; Weaver et al., 2001). Additionally, parents report being very concerned with the online sexual content their children encounter, sometimes employing internet filters (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003). Considering this widespread concern, it is important to acknowledge that some adolescents deliberately access

pornography online for various purposes, ranging from pure curiosity to a need to learn about body responses to sexual stimuli or how to have sex. While the research field, primarily media psychology that is studying the undesirable effects of sexual media, has been decidedly negative; there are positive aspects to adolescents' use of online SEM, including educational functions. As it is likely that more parents and educators would want adolescents to be able to access beneficial sex educational material, this may complicate the cultural script attached to online pornography and the measures we take publicly to deter adolescents from accessing online SEM. Of course, whether parents and educators consider explicit sexual content to be a worthwhile educational tool in general is a subject worth greater discussion. Acknowledging the negative effects that pornography may have on adolescents' psychosexual development, especially when pornography is used to an increased extent; the discussion should begin with questions about how to provide adolescents with information that would satisfy their curiosity about their body responses to various sexual stimuli or about how to have sex. Last but not least, acknowledging that adolescents, both girls and boys, access pornography on the internet promotes the question of how to enhance the critical evaluation of mediated content.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed the evidence for adolescents' use of online pornography. While it is clear that many young people use SEM to be sexually aroused, this is not its only function. Indeed, SEM can also be used beneficially in the context of a social relationship and to provide adolescents with educational information about the mechanics of sexual positions, information about sexual orientations, and sexual diversity. Indeed, pornography can even be used to achieve different purposes simultaneously, blending the different functionalities of online SEM. Some adolescents have also shown that they are savvy users, capable of criticizing online pornography for the aspects they deem unrealistic or negative; this can also occur among adolescents who simultaneously hold positive opinions about online pornography. Considering this nuanced view and functionality of online pornography, we find it useful to continue to utilize and promote. Häggström-Nordin, Sandberg, Hanson, and Tyden's (2006) more general definition of pornography stipulates that pornography consists of explicit sexual content without defining its purpose. By adopting a definition that is more open to interpretation, we believe that researchers will be able to investigate adolescents' use of pornography in a more exploratory and useful manner without defaulting to sensationalism and the negative sexualization of adolescents' online experiences. As digital technology continues to change, the context surrounding pornography will

as well. Immediately after the development of the first pornography app for Google Glass, Google banned the development of apps that promote explicit sexual content (Oremus, 2013). However, it is not likely that Google will be able to keep pornography off Google Glass for long. Adolescents may someday grow up being able to watch pornography with a head set; thus, it is imperative that we fully investigate how adolescents' experiences with SEM can be potentially harmful and/or helpful. In addition, we should investigate the contexts where the educational dimensions of SEM are considered beneficial or awkward.

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