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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Pornography sexual behaviour and risk behaviour at university[☆]



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Pornography;
Students;
Sexual behaviour;
Risk behaviour;
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Summary

Introduction. – The pornography industry is a pervasive influence on adolescents, nearly all of whom are exposed to it via the internet, either willingly or unwillingly and at a more or less premature age. Is there an association between exposure to pornography and some forms of risk behaviour?

Method. – Eight hundred and twelve Lille students responded anonymously to a questionnaire given to them on the occasion of a consultation at a health centre. Logistic and linear regressions were used for statistical analysis.

Findings. – Nearly all men and 80% of women had been exposed to pornography. The average age of initial exposure was 15.2 years. Exposure at a premature age is associated with sexual activity at a younger age and with a greater inclination to seek out casual partners and use cannabis more frequently. The age of exposure does not on the other hand appear to have any influence on the number of sexual partners, the practice of anal penetration, alcohol or tobacco consumption, contraceptive use and taking risks in terms of sexually transmitted infections. Frequent viewing of pornographic images is associated with sexual activity at a younger age, a larger number of sexual partners, an inclination to seek out casual partners, the practice of anal penetration, a lower level of prevention of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies and finally, a higher consumption of alcohol and cannabis. In conclusion, these findings should be taken into account, and should lead those involved in sexual health and sex education to increase the amount of information they provide to adolescents.

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Introduction

Nowadays, there are several factors that might lead us to believe that there have been profound changes in the sexual habits of adolescents and young adults since the end of the 20th century. The reasons for this are certainly manifold, but there is no doubt that one of them is the growing influence of the media and the increase in the consumption of images of a sexual nature. This phenomenon has become considerably widespread with the development of the Internet and the pervasive online presence of the pornography industry.

The pornographic material available on the web is extremely varied and access to it is free of charge and very easy, even for under-18s, but Internet users are also unintentionally exposed to it on a more regular basis (Ybarra et al., 2009).

One frequently hears that this consumption of pornography has significant harmful effects on the sexual and emotional development of young people, but there has been little work done to try to provide scientific proof of this relationship. We present here the findings of a study conducted on more than 800 students aged 17 to 29, the aim of which was to examine the potential link between exposure to images of a pornographic nature ("IPNs") on the one hand, and sexual habits and some risk behaviours on the other.

Population studied and method

A questionnaire was offered to all students who attended a consultation appointment at the Universal Health Centre of the Lille Catholic University, open to all students from the area.

This questionnaire was completed individually and anonymously by students who wished to do so, either directly in the waiting room, or at a later time, then left in the box provided for the purpose.

This prospective study was done on the basis of data from questionnaires returned between 4 March and 28 June 2013.

The questionnaire contained 25 questions (Appendix A) on the following aspects:

- age and gender;
- age of initial contact with IPNs, means by which, frequency with which and conditions under which IPNs are currently consumed;
- experience of IPNs;
- sources of information on sexuality;
- age and experience of first sexual relationship;
- current sexual practices;
- alcohol, tobacco, drug consumption;
- method of contraception used;
- use of a condom, uptake of screening service for Sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

The data were captured in the software ACCESS. SPSS software was used for the statistical analysis. Four exposure variables were analysed in particular: premature age of exposure to IPNs, frequency of exposure greater than once a week, then greater than once a month and, finally, willing exposure to IPNs.

For each of these, we analysed the association with different response variables using logistic regressions for binary response variables (results expressed as an Odds ratio) and linear regressions for continuous response variables (results expressed as a linear coefficient). The associations were calculated directly then, controlled for age and sex. By taking the data into account in this way, we were able to obtain an "adjusted" result, permitting us to take into consideration potential differences arising from age or sex.

For all tests, a *P*-value of less than 0.05 was deemed to be statistically significant. A *P*-value of less than 0.001 was deemed to be highly significant.

Findings

Eight hundred and twelve students responded to the survey. Eighteen questionnaires could not be used because of missing or inconsistent responses and, as a whole, the study encompassed 794 students; 491 women and 303 men (Table 1).

The average age of the population is 19.8.

Exposure to pornographic images

Eighty-six percent of the students have been exposed to IPNs, mostly online. The frequency of exposure is greater for men than for women (98.7% vs 78.8%), but men are also exposed at an earlier age: the average age at which men start to be exposed is 14.5, whereas for women, it is 15.8.

Nearly one student in two states that they were unwillingly exposed to IPNs.

A quarter of the students' views pornographic sites 1 to 4 times a month and 9% of them consume pornography more than once a week. The frequency of exposure varies greatly between men and women. This becomes clearer when it comes to "regular consumers", a phenomenon which concerns 18.4% of men, but merely 1.6% of women.

Sexual activities

Eighty-eight percent of the students have had sexual relations, and the ratio is more or less equal between men and women (86 vs 89%).

The average age of their first relationship is 16.9, and here too, there is only a slight difference between men and women (16.8 vs 17).

The students questioned have had an average of 4 partners. Men are more likely to seek out casual partners than women (12% vs 3.4%).

There is very little difference between the sexes in the sexual practices, which they have tried. Ninety-seven percent of them have practised vaginal penetration, and 23% anal penetration. Eighty percent of the students have practised oral sex. There are, on the other hand, larger numbers of men who have experimented with relationships with several partners (6.1% vs 3.4%).

Female students seem to find it easier to take up the STI screening service. Only 34.2% of them stated that with every partner, they arrange for a screening, as opposed to 15.6%

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