



# Adolescent religiousness as a protective factor against pornography use



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined mediators of relations between adolescent religiousness and pornography use. The sample consisted of 419 adolescents (ages 15–18 years;  $M$  age = 15.68,  $SD$  = 0.98; 56% male). It was hypothesized that religiousness (religious internalization and involvement) would protect adolescents from pornography use (accidental and intentional viewing) by increasing self-regulation, conservative attitudes towards pornography, and social control against pornography. Path analyses revealed religious internalization and involvement were indirectly linked to intentional viewing through all three mediators. For accidental viewing, the only indirect effects were from religious internalization through self-regulation and social control, and from religious involvement through social control. Thus, religiousness may protect adolescents from intentional and accidental exposure to pornography.

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Recent advances in technology, particularly the Internet and “smart phones,” have led to increases in pornography viewing by adolescents (D’Orlando, 2011). This is largely because such technologies make pornography more available and affordable, and easier to access anonymously (Cooper, 1998). It is estimated that nearly half of adolescent Internet users have viewed online pornography in the past year, with about two-thirds of those reporting only unwanted exposure (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). Some may wonder whether exposure to pornography might be considered a “normative” part of adolescence. However, evidence is growing linking adolescent pornography viewing to negative health outcomes such as substance use (Carroll et al., 2008; Svedin, Åkerman, & Priebe, 2011), risky sexual behaviors (Carroll et al., 2008; Häggström-Nordin, Hanson, & Tydén, 2005; Lo & Wei, 2005; McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2002; Svedin et al., 2011), sexual victimization (Wolak et al., 2007), depression (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, & Carroll, 2010; Wolak et al., 2007), aggression (Alexy, Burgess, & Prentky, 2009; Mesch, 2009), delinquency (Wolak et al., 2007), low self-worth (Nelson et al., 2010), objectification of women (Zillmann, 2000), permissive sexual attitudes (Carroll et al., 2008; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; Zillmann, 2000), and sexual deviance (Kingston, Fedoroff, Firestone, Curry, & Bradford, 2008; Lam & Chan, 2007). Further, it may function as a “gateway drug” for sexual addiction and compulsivity (Sussman, 2007). Thus, it might be time to consider including pornography use on the list of adolescent health-risk behaviors potentially detrimental to the physical, mental, and social well-being of youth. The next step is to identify risk and

protective factors. Few studies have examined predictors of adolescent pornography use. However, given research demonstrating that religiousness protects against risky adolescent sexual behavior (Brewster & Tillman, 2008; Dowshen et al., 2011; Halpern, Waller, Spriggs, & Hallfors, 2006; Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003; Ogland, Xu, Bartkowski, & Ogland, 2011; Regnerus, 2007; Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright, & Randall, 2004; Smith & Denton, 2005), it may also protect against pornography use. The purpose of the present study was to examine links between religiousness and adolescent pornography use, and explore the underlying mechanisms.

### Protective factors for pornography use

There is limited research on protective factors for adolescent pornography use. In terms of protective contexts, higher parent education (Brown & L’Engle, 2009), higher socioeconomic status (Brown & L’Engle, 2009), greater attachment to school (Mesch, 2009), healthier family relationships (Mesch, 2009), and more frequent family religious practices (Nelson et al., 2010) are predictive of less exposure to pornography for adolescents. A few studies have also found religiousness, which encompasses thoughts, emotions, and behaviors related to religious groups and ideologies, to be protective against pornography use (Mesch, 2009; Nelson et al., 2010; Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004). For example, adolescents who attended religious schools and self-identified as religious viewed pornography less frequently (Mesch, 2009). Similarly, adults who more frequently attended church viewed pornography less frequently (Stack et al., 2004). Among religious undergraduate males (all of whom felt pornography use was morally wrong) more frequent religious practices predicted less use of pornography (Nelson et al., 2010). Although these studies provide emerging evidence

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for links between religiousness and pornography use, some involved adults, and all did little to elucidate the underlying processes. Thus, relations between adolescent religiousness and pornography use remain unclear.

#### *Religiousness and teen sexuality*

Even though little work has examined associations between religiousness and adolescent pornography use, there is a substantial body of research linking religiousness to sexual behavior that may be leveraged for understanding pornography use (Brewster & Tillman, 2008; Dowshen et al., 2011; Halpern et al., 2006; Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003; Ogland et al., 2011; Regnerus, 2007; Rostosky et al., 2004; Smith & Denton, 2005). Specifically, such studies have reported that greater involvement in and commitment to religion is predictive of delayed onset of sexual activity, and safer and less frequent sexual behaviors thereafter. A few of the key proposed mechanisms linking increased religiousness to decreased adolescent sexual risk-taking are self-regulation (Crockett, Raffaelli, & Shen, 2006; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), sexual attitudes (Meier, 2003; Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Murray-Swank, 2007), and social control (Crockett, Bingham, Chopak, & Vicary, 1996; Rostosky et al., 2004).

First, evidence is mounting linking religiousness to self-regulation (which is sometimes equated with self-control and sometimes seen as a broader concept encompassing self-control; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Self-regulation is the ability to regulate one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, and is posited as a potential mechanism by which religiousness leads to better health and well-being. There are a number of potential reasons why religiousness might improve the ability to self-regulate. For example, religion leads some goals to be "sanctified," making them more salient and internalized. Additionally, religious belief in supernatural agents that observe, judge, and reward or sanction behavior can increase self-monitoring of actions. Many aspects of religiousness, such as religious rituals like fasting, also have the potential to boost self-regulation strength by incentivizing and providing opportunities for practicing self-constraint. These and other mechanisms seem to link religiousness to increased self-regulation, and then self-regulation in turn acts as a protective factor against sexual risk-taking because it enables people to better keep their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in line with internal (i.e., personal) and external (e.g., those of the society, community, religion, and family) standards regarding sexuality (Crockett et al., 2006).

Only two studies have examined self-regulation as a mediator of relations between religiousness and sexual behavior. One was a study of college students looking at religiousness (a composite of involvement and importance) predicting virginity status and oral sex experience by way of self-regulation (Vazsonyi & Jenkins, 2010). They found that self-regulation mediated links to virginity status for males but not females, but mediated links to oral sex for both. The second study looked at African American youth (Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, Murry, & Brody, 2003), and examined relations between religious importance and a sexual risk-taking index (frequency of sex, frequency without birth control, and frequency without condom) by way of self-regulation. While religious importance was negatively related to sexual risk-taking, this relation was not mediated by self-regulation. However, it should be noted that measures of temperament were also included as predictors of self-regulation, and they accounted for much of the variation in self-regulation. Further, other studies confirm the mediating role of self-regulation when predicting substance use and deviance (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

Second, others have found attitudes about sex to mediate the association between religiousness and sexual behavior (Meier, 2003). Attitudes are personal evaluations of a given behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) — in this case sex. Given that most religions have doctrines and practices aimed at regulating sexual behavior, higher

religiousness is typically related to holding more conservative attitudes about sexuality (Regnerus, 2007). In turn, according to the Theory of Reasoned Action (a prominent psychological theory of the key predictors of behavior; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), one of the most important psychological predictors of behavior, including sexual behavior, is a person's attitudes about that behavior (Gillmore et al., 2002). Thus, attitudes about sexuality may mediate relations between adolescent religiousness and sexual behavior. The one study so far to demonstrate this link found religiousness (importance of religion and frequency of attendance, prayer, and youth group participation) predictive of sexual intercourse a year later via attitudes about sex (Meier, 2003).

Third, social control, which is social pressure that attempts to encourage or discourage certain behaviors, has long been posited as a mechanism by which religiousness reduces deviant behaviors (Durkheim, 1966). Perceived social norms regarding sexuality are also another proximal predictor of sexual behavior based on the Theory of Reasoned Action, in addition to attitudes (Gillmore et al., 2002). According to the notion of social control, perceptions of social norms serve as behavioral standards. Even awareness that others in one's group know of one's violation of a group norm can lead to feelings of shame. This resulting negative self-evaluative affect is heightened if group members have a negative reaction to a norm violation. Over time, a learning process takes place such that anticipation of shame motivates compliance with the group norms. Unfortunately, social control is rarely directly measured, but only inferred from religious affiliation itself. Only one study (of emerging adults) directly tested social control as a mediator linking religiousness and sexual behavior, and support was found for the mediating path (Uecker, 2008). Uecker used a two-item index of social control (one item about anticipated guilt if they were to have sex and the other about anticipated reactions from friends to knowledge of them having sex). Religious attendance and religious importance in mid-adolescence predicted whether participants reported having had premarital sex by the follow-up (about 6–7 years later), and these paths were mediated by social control.

#### *Religiousness and pornography use*

Given links between pornography use and sexual behavior (e.g., Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Carroll et al., 2008; Häggström-Nordin et al., 2005; Lo & Wei, 2005; McFarlane et al., 2002; Sussman, 2007; Svedin et al., 2011), such evidence for religiousness and adolescent sexual intercourse might be leveraged for understanding religiousness and pornography use. In other words, the same mediating factors may be at work in linking religiousness to adolescents' viewing of pornography, given that sexual intercourse and pornography use are both dimensions of adolescent sexuality (Regnerus, 2007). Unfortunately, no studies we are aware of have directly examined such mediating processes for pornography use. Nevertheless, there is evidence linking religiousness to the mediators (self-regulation, attitudes, and social control), and other evidence linking the mediators to pornography use. For instance, ample research, reviewed above, has demonstrated the role of religiousness in self-regulation. We are not aware of research linking self-regulation to pornography use. But, one study found that impulsivity and sexual compulsivity were negatively related to frequency of pornography use among adults (Wetterneck, Burgess, Short, Smith, & Cervantes, 2012), and another study found sensation seeking predictive of pornography use frequency for adolescents and adults (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). Impulsivity, compulsivity, and sensation seeking are constructs closely related to self-regulation (Duckworth & Kern, 2011).

There is also some evidence that attitudes towards pornography may mediate relations between religiousness and pornography use. We are not aware of any studies directly examining attitudes as a mediator. But, we know that many religions, particularly more conservative religions such as those within Protestant Christianity, are strongly

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