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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Is pornography pathogen by itself? Study of the role of attachment profiles on the relationship between pornography and sexual satisfaction<sup>☆</sup>



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## KEYWORDS

Pornography;  
Attachment;  
Sexual satisfaction;  
Differential approach;  
Modelisation

## Summary

**Objectives.** – This article examines the effect of the interactions between pornography and adult attachment on sexual satisfaction.

**Method.** – Five hundred and ninety patients (460 women, 130 men; mean age: 24 years), recruited following Snowball sampling methods, participated in an online research investigating their consumption of pornography, sexual satisfaction and attachment profile assessed using the attachment Style Questionnaire.

**Main results.** – Forty percent of subjects ( $n=236$ ) report using pornography. The main media used are the websites, movies and literature. Bivariate analyzes show that men tend to consume more pornography than women. The median number of partners is more important to consumers of pornography. In multivariate models, (1) the socio-demographic variables were not significantly associated with sexual satisfaction, unlike avoidant attachment that has a negative impact on sexual satisfaction ( $B=-0.423$ ,  $P<.001$ ), (2) an effect of the interaction between anxiety dimensions, avoidance and viewing pornography on sexual satisfaction ( $B=0.868$ ,  $P=.001$ ) is found. Overall results highlight the differential impact of pornography consumption on sexual satisfaction according to attachment styles: the impact of pornography consumption on sexual satisfaction is almost zero in Secures; negative in anxious or avoidant individuals, positive in fearful individuals.

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*Conclusion.* – It seems now clear that pornography is not be pathogenic *per se*. If it can be a vector of suffering and affect health, it depends on interindividuals psychological particularities. Clinical implications are considered.

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## Introduction

Restricted to a community of 'insiders' for a long time, pornography is nowadays easily accessible, and financially affordable on an anonymous basis (Cooper, 1998). In addition, online pornography has altered the boundaries between producers and consumers and amateur couples are now among the main sources of pornography distribution on the Internet (D'Orlando, 2011; Paasonen, 2010). A recent study published in the *European Journal of Sexology* (Bulot et al., 2015) shows the potential adverse impacts of the consumption of pornography on the sexual health of young francophone adults. These findings corroborate those of the international literature (Muusses et al., 2015; Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014). They contribute to a negative view of pornography, still often equated with deviance (Perrin et al., 2008; Poulsen et al., 2013).

Our knowledge of pornography remains subject to a great deal of biases, as much ideological as methodological. Such biases are likely to – a priori – overshadow the positive effects of pornography (D'Orlando, 2011; Poulsen et al., 2013). The latter is indeed positively associated with a strong identity (Shek and Ma, 2012), a positive sexual self-esteem (Morrison et al., 2004). Consumed within the couple, it may increase sexual satisfaction by fostering an erotic atmosphere conducive to harmonious couple relationships (Olmstead et al., 2013; Poulsen et al., 2013). Hence the need for a complex approach to pornography involving notably asking the question, whether pornography consumption is a cause or an effect, a mediator or a facilitator to psychological and social (dys)functioning (Hald and Malamuth, 2015; Stulhofer et al., 2010). To this end, we hereby present a model of the effects of pornography on sexual satisfaction based on the theories of attachment in adult relationships (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2010). According to this theory, early interactions with caregivers lead to internalization of operative cognitive models, guiding our behaviour and cognitions, in relation with sexuality in adulthood (Dewitte, 2012). Two orthogonal dimensions are used to define adult attachment (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991): self-image (anxious attachment) and the image of others (avoidant attachment). Literature questioning the relationship between attachment and sexual behaviour (Dewitte, 2012; Gillath and Schachner, 2006; Gouvernet et al., 2015) shows that:

- in anxious subjects, sexuality is exclusively oriented towards the partner. It would be used to respond to their feeling of insecurity and reinforce their feeling of privacy;
- avoidant subjects have a restricted and unsatisfactory sexuality. Here, the Other is perceived more as a functional object offering a personal gain, than as a partner;

- secure individuals (neither anxious nor avoidant) are the most flexible in their sexuality. They favour the dual aspect of sexual relationship without being prisoners thereof; sexuality is also considered fun, while bringing them a personal gain.

A study by Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson (2014) including 373 young men (mean age 19.16 years) proposed a statistical modelling of the relationship between consumption of pornography, sexual satisfaction and attachment. This model, however, obscures the specificity of individuals who, like the fearful, suffer from too close a proximity with the other, due to the fear of being rejected by him. Furthermore, the findings of Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson fail to show the impact of pornography based on attachment styles. We therefore set out here to research the differential impact of attachment styles on the pornography consumption and sexual satisfaction link.

## Method

### Subjects

Subjects were recruited through Snowball sampling methods, already used in studies on sexual satisfaction (Pascoal et al., 2014). The survey was conducted online. Anonymity was ensured at all stages of data gathering. Complete data for 590 subjects (460 women, 130 men; mean age 24 years, SD = 7.2, range: 18–64 years) were collected. Three-quarters of the subjects ( $n=444$ , 75.25%) were students at the time of the study, the remaining quarter ( $n=146$ ; 24.75%) is comprised of active people.

### Measures

Attachment was assessed using the French version of the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ), (Paquette et al., 2001). This is a self-administered questionnaire of 40 items, for which subjects have to comment on their level of approval in relation to statements about themselves or others, on a Likert scale in 6 points. We focused the study on avoidance dimensions (model of other,  $\alpha = .77$ ) and anxiety (model of the self,  $\alpha = .76$ ).

The following question was asked to subjects to determine whether they consumed pornography: "Do you consume pornographic media?". Questions about the type of media used preferably were also included in the questionnaire. Several options were suggested: literature, film, website, magazines, and other...

In continuation of previous studies (Mark et al., 2014; Morgan, 2011), sexual satisfaction was evaluated with the

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