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Understanding and predicting classes of college students who use pornography

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ABSTRACT

Despite the widespread acceptance and use of pornography, much remains unknown about the heterogeneity among consumers of pornography. Using a sample of 457 college students from a mid-western university in the United States, a latent profile analysis was conducted to identify unique classifications of pornography users considering motivations of pornography use, level of pornography use, age of user, degree of pornography acceptance, and religiosity. Results indicated three classes of pornography users: *Porn Abstainers* ($n = 285$), *Auto-Erotic Porn Users* ($n = 85$), and *Complex Porn Users* ($n = 87$). These three classes of pornography use are carefully defined. The odds of membership in these three unique classes of pornography users was significantly distinguished by relationship status, self-esteem, and gender. These results expand what is known about pornography users by providing a more person-centered approach that is more nuanced in understanding pornography use. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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1. Introduction

In American society, pornography use is seen as normative and is widely used (Carroll et al., 2008, in press; Price, Patterson, Regnerus, & Walley, 2016; Willoughby, Carroll, Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2014). Specifically, some estimates suggest that approximately 60% of men and 35% of women have viewed some form of pornography in the past year (Price et al., 2016). Despite its prevalence, current literature offers minimal description of individual pornography users. Previous research offers both negative and positive outcomes from this pornography use. Negative outcomes include being more critical of a partner's body (Albright, 2008), participating in risky sexual behaviors (Carroll et al., 2008; Sinkovic, Stulhofer, & Bozic, 2012; Wright, 2012; Wright, 2013), more accepting of violence against women (Malamuth, Hald, & Koss, 2012), greater levels of depressive symptoms (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011), and less satisfaction in a current sexual relationship (Maddox, Rhoades, & Markman, 2009; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). Positive outcomes include being more sexually educated,

higher satisfaction with one's own body image, and generally being more comfortable with sexuality (Watson & Smith, 2012).

Despite the high rates of pornography use, prevalence of various outcomes of pornography use, and the pornography industry being an annual multi-billion-dollar industry worldwide (Edelman, 2009), there is no clear picture of actual typologies of pornography users. A better understanding of the frequency, purpose, and secondary gains of pornography use is relevant for social scientists when seeking to best describe and evaluate those that use pornography. Specifically, current pornography literature is grappling with how to best define what pornography is and what it entails (Willoughby & Busby, 2016). A typology will offer greater detail and depth to characteristics of pornography users. In other words, most studies simply use a measure of reported frequency of pornography use without investigating deeper into other features of pornography users that may distinguish various sub-types of pornography use. The purpose of this study is to fill a gap within the current pornography literature to further describe pornography users by developing typologies or classes of different users in a sample of 457 college students. In forming these classes, we considered motivations behind pornography use patterns, level of pornography use, age of user, degree of pornography acceptance, and religiosity. Next, membership in these classes was predicted by

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relationship status, self-esteem, and gender. A profile analysis of this nature will advance the field of pornography literature by viewing pornography users in a more comprehensive light considering personal characteristics, pornography use frequency, and motivations behind their use patterns.

2. Individual factors of pornography users

Despite the growing literature examining pornography and its individual outcomes, few studies have considered descriptive characteristics of pornography users. Creating classes of users will assist us with a more detailed depiction of who these individuals are and their pornography use patterns. This will provide a stronger and more deeply integrated foundation for future research and understanding how to best define pornography and its users. Although not exhaustive, the following summarized scholarly work indicates common themes that are prevalent in established research and therefore are important to include in the potential forming of classes of different types of pornography users.

2.1. Gender and pornography use frequency

The largest overarching finding within pornography literature is that individual pornography use is predominantly a male activity (Albright, 2008; Buzzell, 2005; Carroll et al., 2008, in press; Cooper, Galbreath, & Becker, 2004; Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002; Emmers-Sommer, Hertlein, & Kennedy, 2013; McKee, 2007; Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004). Although, some popular culture outlets suggest that pornography use is becoming more of an accepted activity among women (Brennan, 2010; Carey, 2011). Carroll et al. (2008) found amongst a diverse sample of emerging adults that 87% of the men reported using pornography to some extent with approximately 20% of those men reporting daily or every-other-day use. However, only 31% of the women sampled reported some level of pornography consumption, and of those, only 3.2% reported patterns of weekly or more.

Another study corroborated these findings when 75% of the 11,387 men that participated reported accessing or downloading pornography, while only 41% of the 3859 women reported doing the same acts (Albright, 2008). Others have found that men doubled women's weekly average of online sexual consumption, 2.83 h compared to 1.36 h per week (Cooper et al., 2002). Although not entirely conclusive, these frequency trends are common in the literature with men reporting pornography use at substantially higher rates than women (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Cooper et al., 2002).

2.2. Age

Recent literature suggests that although pornography consumption may be present across the life span, there are higher amounts of consumption among younger populations (Buzzell, 2005; Carroll et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 2002; McKee, 2007; Traeen, Spitznogle, & Beverfjord, 2004). In a sample of Australians who reported a degree of pornography consumption, nearly 78% of them fell between the ages of 19–25, whereas only approximately 33% were between the ages of 26–35 (McKee, 2007). These findings corroborate the importance of considering age when evaluating users of pornography.

2.3. Relationship status

Despite the lack of consensus among the recent literature, many suggest that relationship status plays some part in consuming pornography (Albright, 2008; Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Carroll

et al., in press; Cooper et al., 2002; Maddox et al., 2009). Albright (2008) found that divorced individuals were 25% more likely to consume pornography than singles. They also found that those who reported being married were 20% less likely to consume pornography than singles. Alternatively, Cooper et al. (2002) reported that 43.4% of those that reported participating in online sexual activities including pornography, were married. Others argue that relationship status is not significant when evaluating pornography use (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2013). This lack of consensus within the existing literature on relationship status suggests the importance of further evaluating this aspect of pornography users.

2.4. Religiosity and acceptance

Previous literature acknowledges the importance of religion when discussing sexuality (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). Thus, it is natural for religion to play a part in pornography use patterns. Researchers concur that pornography use and religiosity are negatively associated, specifically that those who are less religious are more likely to view pornography (Carroll et al., 2008; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, & Carroll, 2010). Prior research has also illustrated that those who accept pornography use as an appropriate form of sexuality are more likely to view pornography (Carroll et al., 2008; Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013).

2.5. Self-esteem

Previous research has linked pornography use patterns with various forms of self-esteem of users. Some research suggests that increased pornography use is related to increased esteem (Kvalem, Træen, & Iantaffi, 2016), whereas other research indicates that increased pornography use is related to decreased esteem (Morrison, Ellis, Morrison, Bearden, & Harriman, 2006) or even depressive symptoms (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). One qualitative study of adolescents suggested higher forms of self-confidence was related to a decrease in pornography use patterns (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Mansson, 2010). This research indicates that when evaluating pornography users, it is of importance to also consider each individual's self-esteem.

2.6. Motivation for use

Men and women have illustrated a broad spectrum of motivations for consuming pornographic material (Albright, 2008; Cooper et al., 2002). In a sample of men who self-identify as having online sexual problems, two primary motivations for pornography use were identified (Cooper et al., 2004). First, some individuals used the internet to further their real-life sexual interactions. Second, some individuals used the internet as a substitute for their real-life sexual interactions. Although this sample only looked at men who reported having sexual problems, the two behavioral patterns that emerged may generalize to others as well. Presumably, the impacts would vary, both individually and on a romantic partner, if the motivation for the porn use was to enhance a sexual relationship with a partner, compared to if the motivation for porn use was to replace a sexual relationship with a partner.

Many individuals, especially women, view pornography as a part of their love making routine (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011), to improve their sex lives with their current partner in such ways as being open to new things, to increase the ease of asking for sexual needs, and to increase their overall arousal during real-life sexual interactions (Albright, 2008; Grov, Gillespie, Royce, & Lever, 2011). Other individuals, significantly more men, consume pornography for a more solitary sexual enhancement or a complete individual sexual experience (Albright, 2008; Bridges & Morokoff, 2011;

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