

Pornography Addiction in Adults: A Systematic Review of Definitions and Reported Impact



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Self-perceived pornography addiction (SPPA) has increasingly emerged as a concept in research and popular culture, and commentators warn of the reported negative impact that it has. Despite this, “pornography or porn addiction” is not a formally recognized disorder and there is disagreement among researchers regarding its definition or even its existence. Therefore, how SPPA is operationalized often varies, and this is likely to influence the conclusions made about the impact of SPPA.

Aim: This review aimed to examine what the supposed impact of SPPA is, and how the concept is operationalized.

Methods: A systematic review of quantitative and qualitative peer-reviewed journal articles was conducted. The following databases were searched up to November 2015: CINAHL (2001–2015), Embase (1974–2015), Medline (1946–2015), PsychARTICLES (1980), and PsychInfo (1806–2015). Terms used were porn*, sexually explicit material, SEM, erotic*, nonparaphilic, cyberpornography, addict*, problematic, excess*, compuls*, impul*, impact, effec*, behav*, and cause. An asterisk after a term means that all terms that begin with that root were included in the search.

Main Outcome Measures: A review of the the current literature pertaining to SPPA and its reported impact.

Results: We found that SPPA is most frequently operationalized as excessive pornography use and negative consequences. As a result, researchers tended to focus on the frequency of pornography use and related impact as determinants of SPPA. SPPA is reported to affect users and their partners in similar ways, such as increased feelings of isolation and relationship breakdowns. However, we found some methodologic limitations of the primary studies, which limit the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn. Limitations include the lack of representative samples and inadequate measurements of SPPA and its impact.

Conclusion: There still exist a debate regarding the definition and etiology of SPPA as distinct from self-perceived sex addiction. As such, the research landscape is shaped by different theoretical perspectives. Without evidence to suggest one theoretical position as superior to another, clinicians might be at risk of recommending treatment that is in line with their theoretical perspective (or personal biases) but at odds with the motivations driving an individual to engage in particular sexual behaviors. In light of these findings, the review concludes with recommendations for future research.

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Key Words: Pornography; Addiction; Review; Definitions; Impact

INTRODUCTION

There has been a steady increase in the study of addiction to pornography since the 1970s, with an explosion of publications after the advent of the Internet and easily accessible pornography since the mid-1990s.¹ With the increase of access to pornography, there also has been an increase in the number of people

seeking treatment for their perceived problematic pornography use.^{2,3} In consequence, the concept of “pornography addiction” has emerged in clinics and professional discourse,^{4,5} has gained traction in popular culture, and is prevalent in existing online discourse.

However, there remains controversy as to whether “pornography addiction” as a clinical disorder exists, and no established diagnostic criteria or recommended guidelines for “treatment” have been developed. Indeed, although “pornography addiction” has not been accepted and classified as a psychological disorder in diagnostic manuals, researchers have proposed “hypersexual disorder,” which includes excessive pornography use as a symptom,⁶ for Section III of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of*

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Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, which lists conditions requiring further study.⁷ However, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* rejected the proposal of hypersexual disorder. Nevertheless, a growing body of research suggests that SPPA is a real phenomenon and can be devastating to the “sufferers” (and their intimate partners).

In contrast, opponents of the construct of SPPA suggest it is a morally constructed concept designed to maintain sexual order.⁸ Some critics suggest the function of an addiction narrative is not to provide a consensual understanding of the phenomenon but to support the argument that society needs to be protected to stay safe and healthy⁸ and to construct a platform from where “experts” can impose sanctions for “our own good.” When applied to pornography viewing, an addiction narrative could serve to impose the parameters of what is considered “normal” and “safe” within the current moral and social context and to discipline or treat those who transgress these.

Owing to the lack of consensus regarding an operational definition of SPPA, or indeed “pornography” more broadly,⁹ a plethora of terms are used to refer to what is considered problematic pornography usage: compulsive viewing,^{9,10} impulsive viewing,¹¹ excessive viewing,¹² and hypersexual disorder.^{6,13,14} However, terms that are used interchangeably render “pornography addiction” “a malleable concept develop[ed] out of a melting pot of different emerging fields of knowledge”¹ (p 244). In addition, definitions differ in terms of whether the focus is on objective behavior or subjective experience,¹⁵ and as a result, research pertaining to the impact of pornography addiction can be inconsistent.

For researchers to ensure they are measuring psychological phenomena and preventing subjectivity, specifications of measurable and observable conditions must be outlined. Yet how do we operationally define “pornography addiction” if there is no established definition of pornography and addiction is enshrouded in controversy? Furthermore, research that measures the impact of pornography addiction might be using undefined concepts. In consequence, there might be other variables that relate to the impact pornography addiction has on an individual, rather than pornography use per se.

Because research influences clinical practice, policy makers, and social understanding, researchers have a responsibility to minimize bias and maximize the accuracy of information that is communicated to the research community and the public.

AIMS

This review aimed to examine what the supposed impact of SPPA is, and how the concept is operationalized.

For this review, the terms *pornography addiction* and *self-perceived pornography addiction* are used. This maintains consistency and draws on terms popular in our culture. However, this is not to suggest that we (the authors) subscribe to the notion that this behavior is situated within a disease or diagnostic model.

METHODS

Literature Searches

The following databases were searched for quantitative and qualitative articles up to November 2015: CINAHL (2001–2015), Embase (1974–2015), Medline (1946–2015), PsychARTICLES (1980), and PsychInfo (1806–2015). Terms used were porn*, sexually explicit material, SEM, erotic*, non-paraphilic, cyberpornography, addict*, problematic, excess*, compuls*, impul*, impact, effec*, behav*, and cause. Terms were combined as appropriate. An asterisk after a term means that all terms that begin with that root were included in the search.

Eligibility Criteria

Quantitative and qualitative studies were included if they were available in English and published in peer-reviewed journals. Although not without the potential for political bias, peer-reviewed journals are viewed as adhering to the highest quality standard of publication.¹⁶ Furthermore, peer-reviewed journals arguably have the greatest effect on research, treatment, and policy, and therefore focusing on these studies was considered important for the review given that their conclusions are likely to have the greatest influence. Therefore, the following literature types were excluded: books and book chapters, conference papers, policy papers, theses, and secondary literature (meta-analyses). Given that the topic is relatively contemporary, it was unlikely that a wealth of articles would be available; therefore, to minimize further restrictions, the search encompassed articles regardless of methodology.

Studies were required to reference (i) an addiction to pornography (or a variant of the term *addiction*) and (ii) the impact of pornography addiction (or its variants). For this review, articles that did not include data on the impact of pornography addiction were excluded, because the relation between the impact of pornography addiction and its definition was of specific interest. Articles that specifically examined the impact of pornography addiction as a disorder in its own right were included, whereas articles that detailed pornography use as a secondary behavior were not. Owing to the potential limited number of studies, articles that used terms that could encompass additional behaviors, such as *cybersex addiction*, but where pornography use was the primary behavior described, were included. Because our interest was in pornography that was considered legal in much of Western Europe and North America, articles detailing adolescent or child populations, or other illegal activities, were excluded.

Details of the search process are presented in [Figure 1](#). In total, 9,332 studies were initially identified when searching for topic only. After reviewing the titles and abstracts, 86 articles remained. Articles that did not appear in peer-reviewed journals were removed, leaving 51 articles. Reference lists of these articles were reviewed, thus identifying eight additional articles for full-text review. After a more detailed review and application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, specifically whether articles

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