



## How does religious attendance shape trajectories of pornography use across adolescence?☆



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### ABSTRACT

Research increasingly calls attention to the possibility of detrimental consequences of pornography use among adolescents. However, few studies examine adolescent pornography consumption longitudinally or consistently examine the role of religion in shaping pornography consumption, despite an established theoretical basis for the moderating effects of religious attendance on pornography consumption. Using a national longitudinal survey that follows respondents from adolescence into young adulthood, we show that pornography use increases sharply with age, especially among boys. Pornography consumption is weaker at higher levels of religious attendance, particularly among boys, and religious attendance also weakens age-based increases in pornography consumption for both boys and girls. Overall, pornography use increases across adolescence into young adulthood, but immersion in a religious community can help weaken these increases. Future research should follow respondents across adulthood, as well as examine additional aspects of religiosity (e.g., types of religious belief or the regular practice of prayer).

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Debate about the benefits and harms associated with pornography use continues to rage (Flood, 2013; Ley, Prause, & Finn, 2014; McKee, 2007), but researchers generally agree that adolescents who consume pornography place themselves under a variety of risks. Pornography consumption among youth correlates with such potential harms as substance use (Carroll et al., 2008), risky sexual behavior (Carroll et al., 2008; Haggström-Nordin, Hanson, & Tydén, 2005), sexual aggression (Alexy, Burgess, & Prentky, 2009), sexual harassment (Brown & L'Engle, 2009) viewing women as sex objects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009), and instrumental attitudes toward sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010), suggesting that pornography consumption is a detrimental influence on the sexual health of youth that consume it (Bloom & Hagedorn, 2014; Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012). It is therefore important to better understand the factors that buffer against adolescent pornography consumption.

Among these potential mitigating factors is the influence of religion. There is substantial evidence that attendance at religious services is associated with a lower rate of pornography consumption among adolescents and young adults (Hardy,

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Steelman, Coyne, & Ridge, 2013; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, & Carroll, 2010; Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004), and research has identified some of the key mechanisms through which religion could buffer against consumption, such as self-regulation and social control (Hardy et al., 2013). What this research has not done is examine how religion might relate to consumption as adolescents age—in particular, whether religious attendance modifies trajectories of pornography use over time as adolescents become young adults. Relatively little research has examined adolescent pornography use longitudinally (see Peter & Valkenburg, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2014 for exceptions), and none of the current longitudinal research has examined the role of religion in shaping trajectories of pornography use over time. This research has also not specifically considered how changes in age are associated with changes in pornography use, and have focused almost exclusively on Dutch adolescents. Thus, an important contribution of this research is in delineating age-based trajectories of pornography consumption across the broad swath of adolescence in a nationally representative sample. These trajectories matter, as they have the potential to speak to long-term consumption during a period of life when individuals may be most vulnerable to the potentially negative consequences of exposure to pornography (Manning, 2006), as well as to the development of pornography use habits that may persist throughout adulthood.

In this article, we describe the literature relating to religious attendance and pornography use among adolescents, discussing the implications of religious attendance for age-based trajectories of pornography consumption. We then analyze a national longitudinal sample of adolescents in the U.S., examining trajectories of pornography use as adolescents age and assessing whether different levels of religious attendance are associated with different trajectories of use. This research contributes to knowledge of adolescent pornography use, showing whether adolescent pornography use can be potentially curtailed by the influence of religious moral communities (Stark, 1984), communities which have historically opposed pornography (Regnerus, 2007). Though not all parents would seek to take their adolescents to church in order to prevent exposure to pornography, knowing whether religious attendance is an important factor in pornography use may lead parents, educators, and researchers to look to religion for strategies to prevent adolescent pornography consumption.

## Literature review

### *Definitions and trajectories of pornography use*

When defining pornography, we make use of the definition provided by Peter and Valkenburg (2010). Though Peter and Valkenburg prefer to use the term “sexually explicit material”, we retain the use of the term “pornography” because of this term’s acceptance both among pornography consumers (McKee, 2007) and the pornography industry (Taube, 2014). Peter and Valkenburg define pornography as “professionally produced or user-generated (audio)visual material ... that typically intends to arouse the viewer and depicts sexual activities and (aroused) genitals in unconcealed ways, usually with close-ups on oral, anal, and vaginal penetration” (2010, p. 377).

Although little research has followed pornography use across adolescence, studies support the proposition that pornography use increases dramatically as children age. Researchers estimate that the average age at which children first encounter pornography is around 13 (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003), and by the time they reach adulthood, as much as 96% of men and 63% of women report having been exposed to pornography during adolescence (Carroll et al., 2008; Mattebo, Larsson, Tydén, & Häggström-Nordin, 2014; Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). There are several factors that are likely to contribute to an increase in pornography consumption during adolescence. As adolescents age, they receive greater autonomous access to the primary source of pornographic material—the internet (Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002; Wolak et al., 2003). Adolescence is also associated with increasing sexual interest due to the onset of puberty (Flannery, Rowe, & Gulley, 1993); as adolescents gain a stronger interest in sex over time, they should also be increasingly curious about depictions of sexuality, including pornography. Third, adolescents may also experience greater pressure from peers who are experiencing increasing sexual interest and experimenting with pornography themselves (Hare, Gahagan, Jackson, & Steenbeek, 2015). Lastly, exposure to pornography tends to breed further interest in more and more varied pornography (King, 2015; Zillmann & Bryant, 1986), suggesting that once adolescents initially seek out pornography, many will likely continue to seek it out in increasing amounts. Together, then, these factors are likely to lead to powerful increases in pornography consumption as adolescents age, leading us to predict a positive association between age and pornography consumption.

### *Religious attendance and pornography consumption*

Religion has long played a strong role in social and political opposition to pornography. Most religions have doctrines regulating sexual behavior, which usually leads to more conservative attitudes toward sex (Regnerus, 2007). Religious sexual prohibitions extend to pornography, as research consistently finds that those who are more engaged in religious activity consume less pornography than those less engaged (e.g., Nelson et al., 2010). There are multiple pathways through which religious influence on pornography use is likely to extend to adolescents. First, greater participation in religion is associated with increased self-regulation and self-control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), which can lead adolescents to better resist the temptation to engage in illicit behavior, including pornography use. In addition, adolescent attitudes toward sexuality are likely shaped by the persuasive efforts of pastors and other religious authorities (Meier, 2003), who speak about the dangers of pornography and early sexual activity (Regnerus, 2007). Religious communities also exert a degree of social control against

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