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The use and effects of pornography in romantic relationships

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In this article we discuss associations between pornography use by one or both romantic partners and the well-being of the relationship. We highlight several shortcomings of existing empirical research that limit conclusions that can be made about the negative, neutral or positive effects of pornography use on relationship processes. Lastly, we review extant dyadic research on pornography use in a relationship context, and propose the Antecedents-Context-Effects (ACE) model as a guide for future research on this important topic.

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Most people enter romantic relationships at some point in their lives, and over 90% of people will marry during their lifetime [1,2]. Consequently, a great deal of research seeks to ascertain the foundations of happy and successful relationships, and to identify factors that can tear them apart [3]. One factor that is the focus of a growing body of research is the use of pornography by one and/or both partners, with more frequent use generally believed to be detrimental for both individual and relationship well-being over time. Zillmann [4], for example, has confidently concluded that exposure to pornography results in dispositional changes that cause relationship difficulties, including:

...diminished trust in intimate partners, the abandonment of hopes for sexual exclusivity with partners, evaluation of promiscuity as the natural state...Cynical attitudes about love emerge, and superior sexual pleasures are thought attainable without affection toward partners. The institution of marriage is seen as sexually confining. Increasingly, having a family and raising children is considered an unattractive prospect. (p. 42)

While acknowledging that very few studies had assessed the impact of pornography exposure and relationship

processes, Manning [5] nonetheless unequivocally agreed with Zillmann's conclusions a few years later. Of the limited research focusing on the associations between exposure to pornography and relationship processes within dyads, however, the empirical evidence is not so conclusive, with results suggesting both negative *and* positive influences of pornography use on romantic relationships [6^{••},7,8].

The goal of this paper is to highlight the current state of the growing research on pornography use and relationship processes. We argue that, firstly, differences in how pornography is defined across studies; secondly, methodological limitations; thirdly, gendered assumptions; fourthly, 'harm-focused' research approaches; and finally, methodologies that recruit individuals rather than dyads, make it extremely difficult to draw firm conclusions concerning the associations between pornography use and relationship processes and/or outcomes. Current research on dyadic consequences of pornography use is then summarized, and we make some suggestions for future research that will better inform the links between pornography use and relationship well-being.

What 'is' pornography?

While sexual imagery is as nearly as old as symbolic representation, many argue that the contemporary meaning of 'pornography' has its roots in the re-discovery of Pompeii in the mid-eighteenth century [9]. Over the last several decades, scholars have offered, adapted, and asserted many partially overlapping and sometimes conflicting conceptual definitions of pornography. This lack of consensus has led some to claim that pornography has a 'range of meanings, dependent not only on cultural, social and historical contexts, but also on individuals' own experiences and beliefs' (p. 192) [10] which has undermined the perceived utility of conceptually mapping this construct [5].

In the face of such assertions, Kohut [11] has marshaled qualitative and quantitative evidence that mental-representations of pornography are remarkably similar across persons and that such mental representations are strongly tied to the depiction of nudity and sexual behaviour. Although recent evidence suggests that pornography judgments vary as a function of individual differences (e.g. male vs. female), the influence of such factors is actually quite small relative to the impact of content characteristics (e.g. nudity vs. clothing) on such judgments [12^{••}]. Given the available evidence, we advocate the adoption of the following definition of pornography: written, pictorial, or audio-visual representations depicting nudity or sexual behaviour.

Methodological considerations of extant research

The operational definitions of pornography used in empirical research have also varied a great deal. Short and colleagues [13[•]] were unable to find *any* studies published between the late 1990s and early 2000s that used the same operational definition of pornography use. Most operational definitions of pornography use are single item assessments that vary in the constructs being assessed (e.g. pornography, sexually explicit materials, x-rated materials, etc.), the mediums assessed (audio, written word, pictorial, video, Internet, etc.), the time interval that is inquired about (ever, last 12 months, last 6 months, etc.), and the response options provided to participants (Yes/No binary, frequency scales, open-ended/closed-ended time intervals, Likert scales, etc.). Given the diversity of operational definitions used in this literature, it is difficult to ascertain with any certainty how many people use pornography or how frequently it is used. This is a critical limitation for this field of research as the results across studies are not very comparable.

There is also a tendency in the literature to treat studies concerning online sexual activities (OSA) as interchangeable with studies concerning pornography use. OSA is both broad in behavioural focus as it involves any and all online sexual behaviours (e.g. sex chat, pornography use, reviewing sexual health information, sex toy purchase), and narrow in the medium that is traditionally assessed, as it is Internet specific. While almost certainly correlated, different facets of online sexual behaviour should not be equated with pornography use, particularly as more interactive forms of OSA such as sexual chatting or webcam use are perceived more negatively and more like infidelity than pornography use [14,15].

With relatively few exceptions [16[•],17–19], the impact of pornography on relationships is usually studied with correlational designs. In such research, pornography use is typically assumed to be the causal agent impacting relationship quality, or interpreted as such even though cross-lagged longitudinal designs suggests that pornography use may also be a function of relationship quality [20[•],21]. Moreover, other than Baer *et al.* [22[•]], who recently found that sex-drive entirely accounted for the association between pornography use and self-reported sexual assault, few if any researchers have made serious attempts to actively rule out third-variable explanations (e.g. frequency of masturbation, sex drive, other OSAs, etc.) that may account for associations between pornography use and relationship outcomes.

A gendered perspective on pornography consumption

It is assumed that pornography use is more common among men than women. While specific prevalence estimates vary from study to study, with male estimates ranging from 10% to 99% and female estimates ranging

from less than 1% to 88% [23,24], virtually every study that has compared male and female pornography use has indeed found that more men have experience with pornography, and use it more frequently, than women [25].

It has also been asserted, but rarely demonstrated, that men primarily use pornography alone for masturbation whereas women typically avoid pornography use, or use it primarily with their sexual partners. Contrary to such assumptions, recent research suggests that both men and women are more likely to use pornography alone than with a partner, and use it at higher frequency alone than with a partner [26]. Unfortunately, the gendered perspective that predominates the field has often contributed to the neglect of solitary female pornography use within heterosexual relationships [27,28,29^{••},30[•]].

Primarily focused on the likely harms of pornography to relationships

The majority of research concerning the effects of pornography on relationships assumes [8,31,32^{••},33^{••}], assesses, and subsequently confirms, that pornography is detrimental to relationships [18,19,27,28,29^{••},30[•],34–36,37[•]]. Adopting a ‘harm focused’ approach at the outset of a study places critical limits on what can be learned about the typical impact of pornography on the couple. The assumption of harm will either confirm or fail to confirm negative effects, and by virtue of not measuring non-negative outcomes will necessarily tell us nothing about the occurrence of neutral or positive effects that may also occur. Harm-focused rationales that underlie such investigations are also at odds with observations reported by persons who live in relationships in which pornography is used, which typically suggest that pornography users [8,31,38,39,40[•],41] and their partners [8,42] perceive more relationship benefits than harms associated with pornography use.

A focus on individuals compared to dyads

Most research on the associations of pornography consumption and relationship outcomes has recruited individuals involved in romantic relationships rather than both partners [19,27,29^{••},30[•],34–36,37[•],43]. Studying the relationship implications of pornography use is severely limited, however, in studies recruiting only individuals currently involved in relationships. Although it is true that romantic relationships involve individuals, typically two at one time [44], relationship processes cannot be tested by focusing on the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of one individual. Rather, relationships need to be understood in terms of the mutual influence that exists between these individuals over time [45–47]. Research therefore needs to focus on the links between pornography consumption by one or both partners (alone and/or jointly) on interpersonal processes and relationship outcomes, preferably over time, to best document the

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