Trial and Error: Nuance of Pornographic Research

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Abstract

Pornography distribution has undergone a massive change in the age of information. It is far more accessible, cheaper, and anonymous than it was before. Due to these advances in distribution, the popularity and use of Pornography skyrocketed, providing possibilities for sexual exploration and satisfaction to more people than ever. Yet, despite its large popularity, the effects of Pornography are largely still unclear. Studies that researched the subject have had contradictive and contested results. Without clear results, it is difficult to combat the problematic effects of pornography, if they exist. Therefore, this article aims to provide four different aspects or points of contention, which can explain the inconsistency of results. These are: theoretical background, internet use, consumer type, and variety of pornography. As such, I claim that in future studies, these should be considered so that there is a higher chance of consistent results. In conclusion, I argue that studies should not over-generalize any of these points of contention and should focus on analysing smaller groups of users, rather than looking for general trends.

Keywords

Sexually Explicit Material, Pornography, Violent behaviour, Sexual Script Theory

Introduction

With the onset of the information age, pornography has become more widely available than ever before. It is cheaper, faster, and more discreet than previous analogue versions. Furthermore, the variety of pornography one can access has also increased, as the industry grew with the influx of consumers and the logistical practicality of the internet, where all kinds of pornography can be found simply by googling them. It is evident that the developments of modern technology have changed the pornographic industry, and the way and type of pornography people watch.

A growing body of studies has dealt with the effect modern pornography has on a consumer. The results of these studies, however, are inconsistent. Some show a correlation with problematic behavior (e.g. Kim & Ward, 2004; Kunaharan et al., 2020; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006), and other studies show a positive effect on sexual self-exploration and curiosity. Some studies deny any connection whatsoever, stating that the connections found in other studies are a result of faulty methodology (e.g. Ferguson & Hartley, 2022). As evident, there is ongoing confusion in this field of study. Without clear results, there is no way to determine the effects of pornography. In turn no action can be taken to prevent any negative effects if these are proven to exist. Therefore, this literature

review aims to highlight possible points of contention, as to why this body of studies has mixed results. Through an extensive analysis of studies, we have summarized five factors of influence. The article will first analyse the definitions of pornography and its known effects. Furthermore, it will elaborate on four factors or "Points of Contention". These are addressed as the following: Theory, Internet, Consumer and SEM Variety. Methodology as a factor of influence is excluded from these points of contention, as it has already been analysed and proven to affect results in this specific field of research (Ferguson & Hartley, 2022).

The structure if the literature review is as follows, firstly, I will briefly explain the method used for finding and comparing studies. Secondly, I will present four different points of contention, which I conclude are possible reasons for different results I studies. Lastly, I will conclude the review with a general suggestion on how to approach this field in future, as to have a higher chance of getting valid and reliable results.

Methodology

I gathered information through an extensive investigation of a large body of relevant research articles. Studies were firstly gathered through Google Scholar and Web of Science search engines. Afterward, additional studies were identified based on their citations in studies gathered through search engines. These articles were analyzed based on their definition of pornography and whether they found a connection between pornography and behavior. Altogether we analyzed 43 articles. After analyzing the articles based on these two factors, we grouped the articles together based on the factors which differentiated them from each other. This was done through a framework matrix. Through our analysis we found that the most prevalent distinctions articles differ on are factors of theoretical basis, sample type, whether they included online pornography, whether they accounted for different kinds of pornography and different kinds of methodology. After discovering these factors, we found additional information on each of them and attempt to provide an explanation as to why these factors or "points of contention" may affect the results of a study.

Definition and Effects of Pornography

We refer to pornography as sexually explicit material or SEM based on the term's use in previous studies (Carrol et al., 2008; Malamuth & Impett, 2001; Morgan, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). SEM encompasses media that tries to increase sexual arousal with images of nudity and/or sexual behavior (Morgan, 2011). These images are meant to enhance the sexual fantasy and are not predominantly grounded in reality nor would the consumer necessarily enjoy these depictions in real life (Weinberg et al., 2010).

Previous studies have cautioned that the majority of SEM depicts physically aggressive behavior (Bridges et al., 2010) as well as female subordination (Bridges et al., 2010; Brosius et al., 1993; Dines, 2010; Jensen & Dines, 1998; Sun et al., 2016). These depictions are argued to affect a person's sexual attitudes and behavior (Kim & Ward, 2004; Kunaharan et al., 2020; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Studies have shown that early exposure to SEM can lead to promiscuity and risky sexual behaviors (e.g. Braun- Courville & Rojas, 2009; Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Carroll et al., 2008; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006) and a loss of the distinction between porn and reality (Peter and Valkenburg, 2008 a, b, Peter and Valkenburg 2010). Furthermore, multiple studies have found a connection between the consumption of SEM and decreased sexual satisfaction with, and attraction to real-life

partners (e.g. Zillmann & Bryant, 1988; Sun et al., 2016; Morgan, 2011, Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). SEM contributes to sexual aggression (Ferguson & Hartley, 2009; Fisher & Kohut, 2017; Linz, 1985) and is also associated with a preference for porn-like sex (Miller et al., 2019 a, Morgan, 2011; Sun et al., 2016) and expectations for porn-like sex (Miller et al., 2019 b). Considering that the majority of SEM is aggressive (Bridges et al., 2010), these preferences and expectations for porn-like sex point to a worrying trend.

Consequently, under the influence of SEM, people expect more aggressive types of sexual behavior from their partners. While aggressive behavior is not inherently bad, we must note, that it is problematic when inexperienced adolescents under the influence of SEM begin to internalize SEM expectations through their continuous consumption of SEM content. This can lead to a distorted view of vital concepts like consent, communication, dominance etc. Due to this distorted view, there is a danger that consent will not be asked, and boundaries will not be respected leading to risky and coercive sexual relations, which can cause trauma to the parties involved. It is imperative to also recognize that the victim party in the majority of these cases are women and girls (Mumford et al., 2020; Sobsey et al., 1991), who are expected to fulfill the expectations of men who are the predominant consumers of SEM (Carrol et al., 2008; Hald, 2006; Johansson and Hammarén, 2007). As researchers, we are obligated to consider this possibility and warn the institutions responsible for adolescent care about this worrying trend of adopting aggressive sexual expectations.

However, SEM is not uniform, behavior exhibited in them varies. Studies that solely measure SEM use (as those cited above), cannot portray an accurate effect of SEM, just the general trends of the majority (Sun et al., 2016; Morgan, 2011). Multiple studies have highlighted the positive effects of SEM, like sexual education and sexual self-exploration (e.g. Hesse & Pedersen, 2017; Tiefer, 2004; Weinberg et al., 2010). Furthermore, people tend to view their experiences with porn positively (e.g. Ciclitira, 2004; Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Loftus, 2002). The effects of SEM, therefore, are varied, and there is no clear distinction that would determine it to be solely problematic, however, enough studies have shown a worrying trend, so a cautious approach is warranted. Furthermore, the difference in findings can be a result of using varying supporting theories or, as Ferguson and Hartley emphasize, lackluster methodologies (2022).

By the majority, we mean that these studies aggregate information from individuals who belong to different subgroups of society, without necessarily distinguishing between them. Furthermore, the same can be stated about the SEM content itself, there are very different kinds of SEM available online. Therefore, because the consumers and the provided product can vary, simply looking at the overall trends may not provide a clear or even truthful picture of the situation. For example, some subgroups may consume non-aggressive SEM, and do not experience any change in their expectations, furthermore, they may even benefit their personal life. Multiple studies have highlighted the positive effects of SEM, like sexual education and sexual self-exploration (e.g. Hesse and Pedersen, 2017; Tiefer, 2004; Weinberg et al., 2010). Furthermore, people tend to view their experiences with porn positively (e.g. Ciclitira, 2004; Hald and Malamuth, 2008; Loftus, 2002). The effects of SEM, therefore, are varied, and there is no clear distinction that would determine it to be solely problematic.

Varied results, however, are not a reason to disregard the results of the cited studies. The potential harmful effects of SEM consumption should still be considered, and preventative action should be taken by government institutions to ensure that expectations for SEM like intercourse do not become expected. This is especially dangerous for adolescents, as it can lead to dangerous behaviour such as disregarding consent and not respecting boundaries. Similarly, the studies citing SEM content as a way to explore sexuality should also still be considered, as they may provide benefits for queer individuals. The inconclusive as well as sometimes being methodologically unsound (Ferguson and Hartley, 2022) results of studies on the influence of SEM are not a justification to disregard the consequences these may have. Preventative measure should be taken regardless of whether the academic field agrees.

First Point of Contention: Theory

The above-mentioned studies explain the connection between SEM and its effects, through two different theories. These theories are the crucial mechanism, through which the studies explain why and how SEM is connected with people's behavior. Furthermore, they serve as a possible explanation for why studies produce different results.

Sexual script theory or SST is the first of these approaches, it derives from social learning theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Crucial to SST is the concept of social constructionism, which deigns reality because of shared beliefs within a social group (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Essentially SST states, that SEM serves as a heuristic script we learn through watching SEM, which we apply to our real-world sexual interactions. So, the behaviour an individual exhibits during coitus will be the one they are familiar with because they have seen that behaviour in SEM content. Not all scripts are accepted, however, as people tend to select scripts that are more accepted within their societies (Weinberg et al., 2010), such studies using this theory doubt that the most extreme scripts will be accepted. Neither will they be re-enacted exactly as they are seen in the SEM content. SST provides a sensible explanation, as to why SEM can cause a behavior change, while to an extent accounting for the nuance of the varying human behavior under the effect of similar SEM content.

Two sociobiological (or evolutionary) approaches were present within the body of studies we have analyzed, Adult Attachment Theory and The Coolidge effect. Adult attachment theory (AAT) was developed by Hazan and Shaver based on the Attachment theory by Bowlby (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The theory states that the romantic behavior of adults is a result of how they were treated in their childhood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This approach believes that certain types of attachment styles (avoidant and anxious) are more prone to SEM and that these attachment styles represent the third variable, which affects both SEM use and behavior (Park, Blomkvist & Mahmut, 2021). The other approach is the Coolidge effect, which states that males view SEM because they are programmed to seek new mates, as that helps them spread their genes (Wilson, Kuehn & Beach, 1963). Current research on this effect is skeptical (Sculley & Watkins, 2022), however it is not refuted.

These theories are relevant as they highlight and attempt to explain the behavior and SEM influence or use. Yet they differ in how these variables interact with one another. Sociobiological approaches differ from SST, as they do not believe SEM to affect behavior, instead, they claim a third variable, the combination of a person’s biological disposition and childhood is the underlying variable affecting both SEM consumption and behavior.

With different underlying mechanisms of interaction, results cannot be interpreted similarly and differences in results emerge, hence theory is a crucial point of contention for the difference in results.

The Second Point of Contention: Internet

The Internet is a vital component of the massive popularity SEM has. In July of 2023, the top five websites that distribute free pornography altogether measured online traffic of 30.4 billion visits from a little less than seven billion unique users (Semrush Traffic Analyticsm, 2024). Along with the development of the Internet, pornography has become more popular, diverse, and accessible (Ogas and Gaddam, 2011). Internet SEM attracts a massive global audience, as well as creating more frequent pornography use (Buhi al., 2009). Furthermore, adolescents often use the Internet to find health information, which can include sexual topics (Rideout, 2001). However, it can also expose them to abnormal sexual media and interests (Nixon and Düsterhöft, 2017).

The Internet is, therefore, a vital component of how we interact with sexuality and SEM content and should be examined when considering the mixed results of previous studies. The reason why the Internet affects the use, frequency of use, age of the user, and sexual interests can be explained by the Triple-A engine (Cooper, 1998). The triple-A engine stands for affordability, accessibility, and anonymity. Cooper (1998) argues that the Internet enables users' easy access to stimulation no matter the time, is free, therefore, affordable, and anonymous. The model explains all the above-mentioned findings. SEM has grown in popularity as it is now cheap and constantly available to people through their electronic devices. Adolescents encounter it sooner, as they stumble upon it through the use of the Internet. The anonymity provides individuals with the ability to explore their sexual interests without fearing public exposure or humiliation. Lastly, it is more difficult to resist the impulse of consuming SEM (Cooper, 1998), if it is constantly available to you for free. The connection between Internet SEM or Internet Pornography (IP) is further elaborated on by Wetterneck and his colleagues (2012). To clarify, the terms internet SEM and IP are interchangeable, but the IP and SEM are not, as SEM also encompasses offline forms of pornography (Malamuth & Impett, 2001). They propose a more nuanced view of how the Internet changed the consumption of SEM. They built on the work of Young (1999), who introduces the component of addiction to Cooper's (1998) Triple A engine.

According to Young (1999), IP consumption can lead to a form of Internet Addiction. Based on how people can get addicted to IP, Wetterneck and colleagues research how compulsion and impulsion are connected to IP use. They found that the IP enables addictive behavior by making consumers more prone to SEM addiction through a cycle of using IP on impulse to relieve sexual urges. This use of IP then become perpetuated through physiological reinforcement, leading to more use of IP. To explain the mechanism behind this cycle, they refer to sexual impulsivity and compulsivity (Wetterneck et al., 2012). Although the exact relationship is still unclear, their findings support the model where sexual impulsivity is the trigger for consuming IP and sexual compulsivity is the mechanism that perpetuates the behavior. Whether there exists a feedback loop between IP use and impulsivity is unclear (Wetterneck et al., 2012). The study of how IP affect impulsivity and compulsivity is part of a larger body of studies, which study IP addiction as a sub-category of Internet Addiction. The consensus of these is that SEM distributed over the Internet is a different consumer relationship than other forms of SEM consumption. The original Triple A Engine as proposed by Cooper (1998), which highlights the

accessibility, affordability and anonymity is crucial for this claim. It is important to be aware that this engine does not simply work for the consumer but also for the provider. The selling of SEM became faster and more efficient due to development of the Internet. The "adult section" of a local video rental shop can hardly compete with Pornhub.com. An almost endless source of new SEM, which can constantly entertain your brain with new forms SEM, which is accessible at the tip of your fingers. It is evident that the Internet plays a vital role in how SEM affect consumers.

Therefore, we believe it crucial to consider the Internet a vital component of contemporary SEM use. The use of Internet SEM although unregulated, should not be considered as solely negative or positive. Due to its vast and diverse use, its effect cannot be generalized. Wetterneck and colleagues (2012) found that problematic SEM use is associated with both positive and negative effects. One of the findings of Internet SEM is that individuals can explore abnormal sexual interests, in other words, explore their sexuality. Exposure to SEM can sexually empower individuals and normalize unconventional sexual behaviors (Weinberg et al., 2010) and is a safer alternative for queer consumers, compared to other mediums (Grov et al., 2008). *Hence, the internet serves as a great liberator for those, who do not fit the norm, providing a possibility to express themselves and explore their sexuality when that is not possible in the real world.* On the other hand, this same freedom to explore sexuality also allows for the consumption of questionable SEM content such as rape fantasies, child pornography, and bestiality (Harrison and Ogden, 2018) . Therefore, we must again exercise caution when determining the benefits and problems of SEM. Regardless of the benefits or faults though, it is evident that future studies should consider whether their research participants consume SEM through the Internet and how that may affect their behavior. Given the profound impact of the Internet on the accessibility, frequency, and nature of SEM consumption, it becomes clear that failing to account for the medium through which pornography is accessed may be a key reason behind the inconsistent findings in research on its potential link to violent behavior.

Third Point of Contention: Consumer

It is important to keep in mind that the type of SEM content that is produced is to an extent determined by the consumers. The more views, comments, and likes (in other words, engagement) a SEM product generates, the bigger the incentive to create more. As such it is vital, that we understand who consumes SEM. Gender, low impulse control, and dark triad traits all correlate with higher SEM use. Men tend to use more SEM (Carrol et al., 2008; Hald, 2006; Johansson and Hammarén, 2007) and begin to use it at a younger age (Carrol et al., 2008). They also get more aroused by SEM than women (Paul, 2009) and tend to consume it alone, while women prefer to consume it with a partner (Ferree, 2003; Hald, 2006; Johansson and Hammarén, 2007). Bigger consumption of SEM by men is often attributed to most SEM being tailored for male fantasies (Brosius, Weaver, and Staab, 1993; Jensen and Dines, 2013), which often include male dominance and female submission. Similar fantasies could potentially also be associated with individuals with low impulse control and dark triad traits, both of which have been associated with higher SEM use (Egan and Parmar, 2013; Burtăverde et al., 2021). Many studies did focus solely on young men (e.g. Egan and Parmar, 2013; Sun et al., 2016 Miller et al., 2019 a). Yet as seen in the report from the Year 2023 in review from Pornhub, the consumer base is varied. Young adults from 18 - 34 make up 53 percent of all users. Furthermore, men make up 64 percent of all users. As such, there is a large body of SEM consumers who are excluded from studies. These consumers may be affected by SEM differently compared

to the young male population, and these differences may contribute to the varied results of studies examining the connection between SEM and behavior. This highlights how overlooking the diversity of SEM consumers may distort findings and contribute to the inconsistency in research outcomes regarding pornography's potential link to violent behavior.

Fourth Point of Contention: Variety of SEM

As previously established, the effects of SEM on sexual preferences and behaviour are mixed and further research that differentiates types of SEM is needed so that correlations become more transparent. A crucial medium of SEM, that has not received the necessary attention it needs, is hentai. The unique properties of Hentai SEM will serve as an example of why separating SEM content is necessary. Hentai is the most searched term for online pornography, as evidenced by the yearly insights of Pornhub (2023, 2022, 2021), its popularity is on the rise since 2004 (Walker, Makin and Morczek, 2016). The term originates from Japan, where it is used to describe the most extreme types of animated SEM (Ortega-Brena, 2008), literally translating to »abnormal sexual desires« (McLelland, 2006). Globally, however, it is used to describe all animated SEM (Paasonen, 2017).

It is considered a type of paraphilia called fictophilia (Bhugra, Popelyuk and McMullen, 2010) and it is considered to be more prevalent among men (Bhugra, Popelyuk and McMullen, 2010; Långström and Seto, 2006).The genre differs from other SEM as it is presented through animation, comic books, video games, etc. (Freedman, 2020). Freed from realistic bodies and legal limitations (Kunaharan et al., 2020), hentai creates fantastic and unrealistic narratives often involving non-human beings (demons, monsters, tentacles, etc.) as well as physically impossible sexual acts (e.g. Paasonen, 2017; Ortega-Brena, 2008; Josephy-Hernández, 2015). Harrington and Neilson (2009) found that inflicting pain on the female body is often shown in hentai. Some hentai borders on or outright depicts otherwise illegal SEM (Ortega-Brena, 2008), such as child pornography otherwise known as lolicon hentai (Galbraith, 2011). Because hentai can be more problematic than other traditional versions of SEM, we believe it is crucial to analyse it separately.

Few studies have dealt with hentai, a recent study done by Almeida (2023) discovered a connection between the frequency of hentai use and sexually aggressive behaviour in both genders and a connection between the intensity of hentai use and sexually aggressive behaviour through the mediation of rape myths. A different study noted that hentai use had no effect on attraction to real humans, only on attraction to and a romantic desire for animated characters (Park, Blomkvist and Mahmut, 2021). Lastly, Harrison and Ogden (2018) highlight that hentai allows people to explore sexuality more freely, than traditional SEM. However, it is important to consider that this sexual exploration can include child pornography (Galbraith, 2011). Lastly, studies done by Almeida (2023) and Park, Blomkvist and Mahmut (2021) both emphasize the lack of research on this topic. As evident from these studies, even the effects from one type of SEM are different, therefore, a further specification regarding typology of SEM is needed. Furthermore, Hentai functions as a medium through which SEM is portrayed, rather than defining the specific content of the material. As such, it often overlaps with other SEM genres and preferences. Therefore, distinguishing between different types of Hentai is essential for more accurate analysis and understanding.

As proof of its controversial nature, attempts have been made by the Australian government to ban all Japanese hentai. The government decided that this was the best course of action to prevent the distribution of child

pornography (Butler, 2020). However, even if physical products are stopped, the content is still widely available online even with governmental barriers in place. Furthermore, a government cannot affect the production of said material, if it is being produced legally in another country, leaving it unable to affect the production of hentai SEM. Hentai is crucially different from other forms of SEM, as it presents unique scenarios, otherwise not depicted. This different content makes it difficult to argue, that the effect of this SEM is similar to the effects of other SEM forms. It serves as an example, as to why SEM differentiation is crucial for a deeper understanding of the connection between SEM and the consumer. As such, hentai exemplifies why differentiating between types and mediums of SEM is essential, as failure to do so may obscure important distinctions in content and consumer impact, ultimately contributing to the inconsistent results found in studies examining the link between SEM and violent behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all four points of contention can affect the results of any study done in this field. Firstly, by choosing either SST or sociobiological approaches, the assumed connections between SEM and behavior begin to differentiate. This variation in connection leads to researchers making different assumptions and getting different results. Secondly, overlooking the significant influence of the Internet leads to similar shortcomings in outcomes, as it has become a central channel through which SEM content is accessed and consumed. Thirdly, analyzing different consumer types is necessary, as current studies have focused solely on the majority, neglecting large groups of users that differ from the majority and are not represented in research. Lastly, as shown through the example of Hentai, the type of SEM consumed is crucial, as the behavior presented in SEM varies depending on the type of SEM it is. These points of contention justify a more nuanced approach to researching the connection between SEM and behavior. However, by only analyzing specific kinds of SEM or consumers, studies cannot make general assumptions about the relationship between SEM and behavior, therefore, these specified studies tend to be less appealing compared to generalized studies. Despite this, we believe that specificity is crucial, as assuming a simplified view of any of these points of contention will lead to a generalized finding, which will continue to be inconsistent with other studies. Therefore, in future studies, we recommend that researchers focus on specific cases of SEM use rather than general studies of the entire population.

Conflict of Interests

There are no identifiable conflicts of interest.

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