



Internet pornography exposure and risky sexual behavior among adult males in the United States

Paul J. Wright^{a,*}, Ashley K. Randall^b

^a Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, 1229 East 7th Street, Bloomington, IN 47405, United States

^b Department of Family Studies and Human Development, University of Arizona, 650 North Park Avenue, Tucson, AZ 85721, United States

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ABSTRACT

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) continue to pose a threat to the public health in the United States. Many sexual behaviors increase an individual's risk of STI contraction. Chief among these are having unprotected sex, having sex with multiple partners, and either paying for sex or having sex for pay. The present study used General Social Survey (GSS) data from 2000, 2002, and 2004 to explore the association between exposure to internet pornography and these STI risk behaviors among adult US males. After controlling for demographic and individual difference covariates, internet pornography consumption was positively associated with having sex with multiple partners, engaging in paid sex, and having had extramarital sex. Internet pornography consumption was unrelated to having unprotected sex. Subsequent GSSs have not asked participants about exposure to internet pornography. As the GSS is the only ongoing, full-probability, national survey assessing social beliefs and behaviors, the present report provides unique insight into the risky sexual behavior patterns of adult male internet pornography consumers in the United States.

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1. Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) continue to pose a threat to the public health in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that more than 1 million US adults and adolescents are currently infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Campsmith, Rhodes, Hall, & Green, 2008) and more than 50,000 new HIV transmissions occur each year (Hall et al., 2008). If current trends persist, approximately 50% of US Americans will contract an STI at some point in their lives (Planned Parenthood, 2011).

Many sexual behaviors increase an individual's risk of STI contraction. Chief among these are having unprotected sex, having sex with multiple partners, and either paying for sex or having sex for pay (Campsmith et al., 2008; Workowski & Berman, 2010). Interventions designed to reduce the risk of STI transmission rely on behavioral research to identify factors that predict an increased likelihood of risky sexual behavior (Hall, Hughes, Dean, Mermin, & Fenton, 2011). The purpose of the present study is to explore the possibility that exposure to internet pornography is a sexual risk factor for adult males in the United States. Specifically, the present study uses General Social Survey (GSS) data from 2000, 2002, and 2004 to explore the association between exposure

to internet pornography and having unprotected sex, engaging in paid sex, having extramarital sex, and having sex with multiple partners. Subsequent GSSs have not asked participants about exposure to internet pornography, and the GSS is the only ongoing, full-probability, national survey assessing social beliefs and behaviors in the United States. Thus, the 2000, 2002, and 2004 GSSs provide a rare opportunity to explore at a national level how exposure to internet pornography associates with STI risk behavior among adult US males.

1.1. Pornography: theory

The term "pornography" is value laden and characterized by many meanings. Following Wright, Malamuth, and Donnerstein (2012), the present report associates no pejorative connotation with the term, using it only as shorthand for mediated content depicting nudity and explicit sexual behavior. Pornography is primarily targeted at males (Malamuth, 1996) and is a lucrative enterprise. The pornography industry in the United States grossed upwards of \$7 billion in 2006 (Edelman, 2009). Although offline pornography continues to attract many consumers, economic indicators show that online pornography is the wave of the future (Edelman, 2009). The anonymity and accessibility of online pornography may encourage males who would not have gone to an adult book store or rented an adult film from their local video proprietor to explore pornography online (Carnes, Delmonico, &

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 812 855 3254.

E-mail address: paulwrig@indiana.edu (P.J. Wright).

Griffin, 2001; Schneider & Weiss, 2001). The tremendous communication potential of the internet coupled with the allure of sexual media has led many to wonder about the social influence of online pornography (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006).

Wright (2011) has developed a script acquisition, activation, application (₃AM) model that explains how exposure to sexual media can impact sexual behavior. The model references numerous social learning and media theories (e.g., the heuristic processing model of cultivation effects, social cognitive theory, priming, uses and gratifications, media dependency), but draws primarily on the script theorizing of Huesmann (1986, 1988, 1998). A scripts perspective on sexual behavior has been recommended by several sex researchers (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Laws & Schwartz, 1977). Huesmann (Huesmann, 1986) argues that mediated models may affect behavior by providing cognitive scripts which (a) suggest what events should and should not be happening, (b) how people should behave in response to what is or is not happening, and (c) what the outcomes of particular courses of action should be. Huesmann's writings reveal three steps in the media effects on behavior process: the acquisition of behavioral scripts, the activation of behavioral scripts, and the application of behavioral scripts.

An acquisition effect occurs when an observer learns a novel behavioral script. Individuals can learn particular scripts from sexual media or "higher order scripts" (Huesmann, 1986, p.131). Higher order scripts are acquired by abstracting the behavioral philosophy guiding media models' behavior. For example, a male might learn both how to solicit sex from exposure to pornography with pay-for-sex themes (specific script) and that sex for amusement, whether with a prostitute or a casual romantic partner, is acceptable and pleasing (higher order script). An activation effect occurs when media exposure cues a script that has already been learned. For instance, a sexual script encouraging group sex may be dormant in an individual's mind until he views pornography with such a theme. An application effect occurs when a script that has been acquired and activated is applied at the level of behavior (e.g., actually exchanging sex for money or having group sex).

Wright (Wright, 2011) proposes a number of individual difference, media content, and situational factors that may prevent the acquisition, activation, and application of sexual scripts provided by sexual media. Given the themes in such content (e.g., attractive models who are positively reinforced for their behavior), the attributes of many males (e.g., lacking in definitive familial sexual socialization), and the obstacles to controlled information processing in many sexual situations (e.g., sexual arousal, time pressure), however, it is probable that exposure to pornographic media results in script matching behavior more often than script mismatching behavior. Consequently, it is important to explore whether pornographic content provides scripts that encourage paid sex, having extramarital sex, having sex with multiple partners, and unprotected sex.

1.2. Pornography: content

1.2.1. Paid sex, extramarital sex, and sex with multiple partners

It has been argued that there are three overarching sexual scripts in US culture: the procreational script, the relational script, and the recreational script (Ward, 1995). The procreational script views sex as a means to generate offspring within the milieu of the traditional family. The relational script views sex as a mechanism through which a devoted couple can create intimacy and communicate liking. The recreational script views sex as a means of receiving physical gratification and sensual ecstasy; such gratifications can be obtained regardless of whether one cares for or is committed to one's partner or partners. Both the procreational and relational scripts would discourage paid sex, extramarital

sex, and having sex with multiple partners. The recreational script would be more likely to accept such pursuits.

Male-targeted pornography tends to embrace a recreational approach to sex (Malamuth, 1996). According to Kline (2001) "the chief proclamation of pornography is great sexual joy without any attachment, commitment or responsibility" (p. 8). Zillmann and Bryant (1988) agree, observing that "pornographic scripts dwell on sexual engagements of parties who have just met, who are in no way attached or committed to one another, and who will part shortly, never to meet again" (p. 521). To conclude, the sexual scenarios presented in pornography may encourage many of the behaviors under investigation in the present analysis due to their encouragement of a higher order recreational sex script.

Some evidence suggests that males may not need to engage in any higher order abstraction to have their beliefs about paid sex, extramarital sex, and sex with multiple partners affected by pornography exposure, however, as these themes appear to be overt in pornographic fare. Content analyses from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s suggest that approximately 5% to 20% of pornography features a prostitution theme (Brosius, Weaver, & Staab, 1993; Palmer, 1979; Palys, 1986; Smith, 1976). Reports from Smith (1976) and Winick (1985) suggest that extramarital sex is a common occurrence in printed pornography. Group sex occurred in 35% of pornographic scenes in videos studied by Brosius et al. (1993) and in 47% of scenes studied by Palys (1986). Internet pornography with these themes can be readily found. Examples of prostitution pornography websites are "mommyneedsmoney.com," "crackwhoreconfessions.com," and "hookerporn.net." Examples of extramarital sex websites are "cheatwife.com," "best-cheating-wives.com," and "cheatingwife.tv." Examples of group sex websites are "myxxx-groupsex.com" and "drunksexorg.com."

1.2.2. Unprotected sex

Very little research exists on the use of condoms in pornography. Wingood et al. (2001) state that sexually explicit films "rarely show contraceptive or STD preventive behaviors" (p. 1118), but do not cite any content analyses to substantiate this assertion. The present study could find only one report on the use of contraception in pornography: (Brosius et al., 1993). This study of video pornography found that only 1% of scenes mentioned contraception. Whether this trend has persisted in our more STI conscious era remains a question for future research.

1.3. Pornography: potential effects

Research into the effects of pornography has primarily focused on its potential to catalyze males' aggression towards females. Comparatively fewer studies have focused on pornography's effect on sexual behavior (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988). Studies that have addressed behavioral associations relevant to the outcome variables of interest in the present study are reviewed below.

Two recent US studies have asked whether individuals who view pornography are more likely to have multiple sexual partners. Braun-Courville and Rojas (2009) interviewed adolescents and young adults at a health center in New York. Youth who had visited sexually explicit websites were 1.8 times more likely to have had multiple sexual partners over the course of their lifetime and to have had more than one sexual partner in the last few months. Using a comparable methodology, Wingood et al. (2001) surveyed black adolescent females recruited from health related settings (e.g., community clinics, school clinics). Girls who viewed pornographic films were twice as likely to have had multiple sexual partners. A study of Swedish high school students aligns with these findings (Haggstrom-Nordin, Hanson, & Tyden, 2005). This study found that male students in the upper echelon of pornography

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