



Predicting pornography use over time: Does self-reported “addiction” matter?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Links between perceived addiction to pornography and pornography use are examined.
- Cross-sectionally, male gender, religiousness, and self-control predicted porn use.
- Cross-sectionally, perceived addiction predicted greater average daily porn use.
- Longitudinally, male gender predicted any acknowledging any porn use.
- Longitudinally, baseline pornography use predicted average daily porn use.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, several works have reported on perceived addiction to internet pornography, or the potential for some individuals to label their own use of pornography as compulsive or out of control. Such works have consistently found that perceived addiction is related to concerning outcomes such as psychological distress, relational distress, and other addictive behaviors. However, very little work has specifically examined whether or not perceived addiction is actually related to increased use of pornography, cross-sectionally or over time. The present work sought to address this deficit in the literature. Using two longitudinal samples (Sample 1, Baseline $N = 3988$; Sample 2, Baseline $N = 1047$), a variety of factors (e.g., male gender, lower religiousness, and lower self-control) were found to predict any use of pornography. Among those that acknowledged use (Sample 1, Baseline $N = 1352$; Sample 2, Baseline $N = 793$), perceived addiction to pornography consistently predicted greater average daily use of pornography. At subsequent longitudinal follow-ups (Sample 1, Baseline $N = 265$; Sample 2, One Month Later, $N = 410$, One Year Later, $N = 360$), only male gender and baseline average pornography use consistently predicted future use. These findings suggest that perceived addiction to pornography is associated with concurrent use of pornography, but does not appear to predict use over time, suggesting that perceived addiction may not always be an accurate indicator of behavior or addiction.

1. Introduction

In developed countries, the majority of adults with internet access have seen internet pornography (Price, Patterson, Regnerus, & Walley, 2016; Rissel et al., 2017; Wright, 2012, 2013). Moreover, in nationally representative studies of adults in the U.S., up to 46% of men and 16% of women report intentionally consuming internet pornography within the past week (Regnerus, Gordon, & Price, 2016). Together, these findings suggest that internet pornography use¹ (hereafter: IPU) is a frequent behavior. However, this use is also controversial, with wide ranging debates about its effects and potentials for harm (for reviews,

see: Duffy, Dawson, & das Nair, 2016; Rasmussen, 2016; Short, Black, Smith, Wetterneck, & Wells, 2011; Short, Wetterneck, Bistricky, Shutter, & Chase, 2016).

Since the advent of the internet and its consequent use as a medium for the sharing of sexually explicit materials, there have been warnings decrying the addictive nature of internet pornography (Cooper, 1998). Although many scholars urged caution before assuming these dangers (e.g., Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lashambe, 1999; Fisher & Barak, 2001), the notion of internet pornography addiction quickly took hold in academic literature (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000) and popular awareness (Boulton, 2008). At present, internet pornography addiction

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¹ Abbreviations used: IPU = Internet Pornography Use; PAatIP = Perceived Addiction to Internet Pornography.

is the subject of dozens of self-help books (Foubert, 2016; Struthers, 2009; Wilson, 2014), online communities (“Reboot Nation”, 2017; “Your Brain On Porn”, 2017), and support groups (“NoFap.com”, 2017). Additionally, there is some evidence that problems related to IPU and purported addiction are also regularly encountered by mental health professionals in their clientele (Gola, Lewczuk, & Skorko, 2016; Kalman, 2008; Kraus, Martino, & Potenza, 2016; Mitchell, Becker-Blease, & Finkelhor, 2005; Short et al., 2016; Twohig & Crosby, 2010). Despite this popularity, scholarly debates about the accuracy and utility of such a construct continue into the present (Clarkson & Kopaczewski, 2013; Ley, Prause, & Finn, 2014).

Alongside these debates about the veracity and utility of a pornography addiction diagnosis, there has been increasing attention paid to perceived addiction to internet pornography (Blais-Lecours, Vaillancourt-Morel, Sabourin, & Godbout, 2016; Duffy et al., 2016; Grubbs, Stauner, Exline, Pargament, & Lindberg, 2015; Grubbs, Volk, Exline, & Pargament, 2015; Grubbs, Wilt, Exline, Pargament, & Kraus, 2017; Leonhardt, Willoughby, & Young-Petersen, 2017). Perceived addiction to internet pornography (hereafter: PATiP) refers to the propensity of individuals to identify as having struggles with IPU, such as perceived compulsivity in use, regardless of whether or not their behaviors are objectively dysregulated² (Grubbs, Exline, Pargament, Hook, & Carlisle, 2015). Although PATiP is clearly related to IPU cross-sectionally (Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015; Grubbs, Wilt, et al., 2017; Leonhardt et al., 2017), a number of studies have consistently found that moral incongruence about IPU (i.e., using pornography although one personally disapproves of pornography) tends to be a better predictor of PATiP than actual IPU (Fernandez, Tee, & Fernandez, 2017; Grubbs, Wilt, et al., 2017; Volk, Thomas, Sosin, Jacob, & Moen, 2016). In short, PATiP seems to be more than just an indicator of behavior and may also be an indicator of personal feelings of guilt or distress about IPU. Even so, PATiP can be a pressing clinical concern.

PATiP is linked to various forms of psychological distress such as anxiety and depression (Grubbs, Volk, et al., 2015), spiritual struggles such as anger toward God and feelings of moral failure, lower self-esteem (Wilt, Cooper, Grubbs, Exline, & Pargament, 2016), relational difficulties (Leonhardt et al., 2017), alcohol use (Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2017), and diminished sexual satisfaction (Blais-Lecours et al., 2016). Additionally, over time, PATiP uniquely predicts psychological distress (Grubbs, Stauner, et al., 2015) and religious and spiritual difficulties (Grubbs, Exline, Pargament, Volk, & Lindberg, 2017). Finally, feelings of addiction to pornography—but not IPU itself—are also related to treatment seeking behaviors for problems associated with IPU (Gola et al., 2016).

In sum, a compelling body of literature suggests that PATiP is associated with a wide range of concerning mental health and social outcomes. However, as of yet, there has been virtually no work examining how PATiP might actually predict IPU itself over time. Whereas perceived addiction to some substances (e.g., nicotine) is known to predict engagement in addictive behaviors (Eiser, van der Pligt, Raw, and Sutton, 1985; Okoli, Richardson, Ratner, & Johnson, 2009), no such data currently exist for pornography. If PATiP is a consistent indicator of actual problems with IPU, then we might expect to find that it

would predict greater IPU both concurrently (as has been found in prior literature; Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015; Leonhardt et al., 2017) and over time (which is yet untested). In other words, if self-reported feelings of addiction are actually reflective of dysregulation, then we might expect to find that PATiP would be associated with increasing patterns of use over time (e.g., as is seen with substance use, Eiser, van der Pligt, Raw, & Sutton, 1985; Okoli et al., 2009) or to uniquely predict use over time, above and beyond other explanatory variables. In contrast, if it is not simply an accurate indicator of dysregulation but also expression of distress or guilt over use, then such relationships might not emerge. To this end, the purpose of the present work was to examine what factors are related to IPU both concurrently and over time, with a specific interest in the role of PATiP in contributing to such use.

2. The present study

Given prior literature linking self-reported IPU to lower levels of religiousness (Perry, 2015, 2017; Rasmussen & Bierman, 2016; Wright, 2013), greater levels of loneliness (Yoder, Virden III, & Amin, 2005), lower self-control (Grubbs, Volk, et al., 2015; Grubbs, Wilt, et al., 2017), and greater levels of PATiP (Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2017; Grubbs, Volk, et al., 2015; Leonhardt et al., 2017), we included these variables as predictors of IPU in analyses. We also included measures of moral disapproval of IPU, as prior works (Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015; Volk et al., 2016) have linked moral disapproval to PATiP, but none have examined how moral disapproval might predict IPU. Additionally, we controlled for socially desirable responding in all analyses, as socially desirable responding does appear to be associated with lower reported use of pornography in some samples (Rasmussen, Grubbs, Pargament, & Exline, 2017). We examined the following hypotheses:

1. We expected to find that cross-sectionally, religiousness (–), loneliness (+), self-control (–), and socially-desirable responding (–) would be associated with greater likelihood of reporting any IPU at all. PATiP was not included as a predictor in this dichotomous prediction (e.g., any use at all vs. no use at all), as only participants who acknowledged use were asked about feelings of PATiP.
2. Among those who did acknowledge IPU, we expected to find that self-control (–), loneliness (+), socially-desirable responding (–), religiousness (–), moral disapproval of IPU (–), and PATiP (+) to be cross-sectionally associated with average daily IPU.
3. Among those who acknowledged IPU at baseline, we expected to find that self-control (–), loneliness (+), socially-desirable responding (–), religiousness (–), moral disapproval of IPU (–), and PATiP (+) to be associated both acknowledging any IPU over time and with average daily IPU over time.

This work seeks to build upon past work by specifically testing whether or not PATiP actually predicts behavior over time. As this work represents further analysis of data previously described in the literature (Grubbs, Stauner, et al., 2015; Grubbs, Wilt, et al., 2017), the hypotheses for these studies were generated prior to analysis, but not sui generis with regards to the data. Although we did not predict these findings based on prior knowledge of this specific data (e.g., Hypothesizing After Results are Known; Kerr, 1998; Spellman, Gilbert, & Corker, 2017), certain aspects of the following work have been indirectly examined in prior studies. Chiefly, the role of IPU (average daily use) in predicting feelings of PATiP was reported in a previous manuscript (Grubbs, Wilt, et al., 2017). However, the reverse prediction (i.e., PATiP predicting IPU itself), which is the primary concern of the present work, was not considered in prior works.

² Of note, the research community is yet unclear on the exact definition of objective dysregulation as it applies to IPU. For example, early works on the topic of cybersex addiction viewed objective dysregulation as > 11 h per week (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999), more recent works have noted that such a definition is not universally agreed upon, while also acknowledging that use exceeding 13 h a week is likely clinically distinct from use that may be < 4 h per week (Kraus, Voon, & Potenza, 2016). In either case, as the focus of the present work was on predicting use at all (regardless of whether or not such behavior is dysregulated), we did not seek to define this term for the population at hand. Furthermore, in prior studies of perceived addiction (Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015; Grubbs, Volk, et al., 2015; Grubbs, Wilt, et al., 2017; Leonhardt et al., 2017) and within the present work, average reported use has often fallen well below an average of 11–13 h per week, again suggesting a distinction between perceived addiction and excessive behaviors.

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