



The Effects Pornography has on Dating and Gender Norms

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Abstract

In this paper, I plan to review the research and findings on how pornography influences gender norms within society and how this has a positive and/or negative impact on relationships and intimacy. During my review, I will explore the different aspects of how pornography influences dating and intimacy, and gender norms within our society. I hypothesize that due to the overwhelming rates of aggression, violence, and objectification of women in mainstream pornographic videos and the surging rates of users viewing these videos on a consistent basis, pornography has a negative influence on dating and gender norms.

Introduction

Over the most recent years, the expansion of the internet has created an endless supply of entertainment and services at our fingertips, in particular the sex industry. The pornography industry has skyrocketed within the last twenty years, where users have a limitless amount of explicit material across hundreds of different genres (Price, Patterson, Regnerus, & Walley, 2016). The rise in pornography usage has also led to several studies investigating the effects pornography has on individuals and on how it affects society. Findings have found that up to 87% of men have admitted to viewing pornography monthly (Carroll et. al., 2008). Research has also found that the most common users of pornography tend to be males ages 18-26 years old, with the audience becoming younger and younger (Carroll et. al., 2008). The research concerning whether the role of pornography in society and dating and intimacy, as well as the effects it has on individuals, is conflicting. While many studies suggest that pornography does more harm in terms of gender norms, the prevalence of intimate partner violence within our society, adolescents' sexual education, and prevalence of adolescent dating aggression within the world of dating and intimacy, critics often point out that some of these studies may leave out important factors that could also

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influence their results. The article, "Should Public Health Professionals Consider Porn a Public Health Crisis?" by Nelson and Rothman, states "Although research suggests that pornography use likely influences some people negatively, it merits further research..." (2020, p. 152). However, researchers can agree on the alarming amount of aggression and objectification in mainstream pornography. These findings have led researchers to question the role pornography has in the creation and maintenance of toxic gender norms and hegemonic masculinity and whether these ideals are capable of changing one's ideologies about gender roles and as far as leading an individual to perpetrate violence against women. Gender roles are not biological but instead learned behaviour and an ideology maintained through many aspects of a culture. Many researchers rely on specific theories to understand and explain their findings. In the case of how pornography influences the minds of individuals and the norms and roles within society, many researchers look toward script theory to understand how individuals may learn these behaviours and ideologies and how the constant rise in the use of pornography in younger people audiences may be sustained. Script theory suggests that the more an individual is exposed to a particular lifestyle, behaviour, or ideology, the more probable it is that the individual will normalize them and exercise them into their own life. Therefore, in the context of pornography, if an individual is consistently viewing violent or aggressive pornographic media, they are more likely to act upon these scripts in their own dating and sexual relationships (Rostad et. al., 2019). Based on this theory, it is reasonable to assume that those who consistently consume pornography that depicts aggression and violence against women may utilize this behaviour in their own sexual relationships as well as alter their view of women and gender roles. In this paper, I plan to review the research and findings on how pornography influences gender norms within society and how this has a positive and/or negative impact on relationships and intimacy. During my review, I will explore the different aspects of how pornography influences dating and intimacy, and gender norms within our society. I hypothesize that due to the overwhelming rates of aggression, violence, and objectification of women in mainstream pornographic videos and the surging rates of users viewing these videos on a consistent basis, pornography has a negative influence on dating and gender norms.

Script Theory and Pornography Usage

Script theory assumes that the more that individuals are exposed to a particular mindset, ideology, or behaviour, the more likely they are to adopt and utilize them in their own lives. It is believed that when an individual is exposed to particular ideologies and behaviours enough that they become normalized and develop into a script or template on how to think and navigate the world. Brem et al. describe sexual script theory by saying, "sexual script theory posited that sexual decision-making, expectations, desires, and norms are modeled after pornography and other cultural portrayals of sex" (Brem et. al., 2018). Considering that studies investigating a content analysis of mainstream pornographic videos found that 88% of scenes portrayed physical violence and 48% portrayed verbal aggressions, the study found that this violence and aggression was towards women 94% of the time. This is cause for this significant concern. (Brem et. al., 2018). According to sexual script theory, if people are using pornography as a template to set their sexual

expectations, behaviour, and norms, this could influence societal gendered norms and roles and can potentially lead to an increase of negative emotions and ideology towards women as well as an increase of violence against women. Brem. et al. discuss this, stating, "... Pornography may reinforce certain behaviours, including physical and sexual violence toward women, by portraying men's and women's pleasure in response to physical and sexual violence in the absence of negative consequences" (Brem et. al., 2018; Bridges et. al., 2010; Seto et. al., 2001; Sun et. al., 2016), they continue by stating, "consumers of pornographic material were repeatedly exposed to these gendered, heuristic scripts for how to behave with intimate partners, and may subsequently use these scripts as templates for navigating real-world intimate encounters" (Brem et. al., 2018; Harkness et al. 2015; Malamuth et. al., 2012). With this information considered, investigations regarding a link between pornography and intimate partner violence and a link between pornography and an increase in toxic masculinity ideology within society are substantial when addressing these growing concerns.

How Pornography Depicts Gender Roles

Norms are socially constructed ways of thinking or behaving that are learned through interacting and observing others. These interactions and observations eventually become a script on how one should think or behave until they are both internalized and normalized. Norms often provide guidelines on how to think, behave and present oneself based on one's gender. Gender roles surrounding masculinity often require men to be physically strong and tough, restrictive of their emotions, dominate over women, show aggression, and act promiscuously. Masculine gender roles are often learned from other men and boys within society through sports and mainstream media such as television, movies, and music, and in the workforce. However, studies have found that pornography also depicts many facets of toxic masculinity, where women are consistently sexually objectified and are more than often victims of verbal and physical aggression (Mikorski & Szymanski, 2017). According to Simmons et. al., research indicates that men who view pornography have lower opinions of women (McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990) and more negative attitudes regarding intimate relationships (Oddone-Paolucci et. al., 2000) than men who do not view pornography" (Simmons et. al., 2008, p.408). Several content analyses have determined that the majority of conventional pornographic content depicts women in a submissive role and are more than often the targets of aggression and violence. In contrast, men tend to be the aggressor and dominate women. Mikorski and Szymanski discuss women's role within pornography, "... mainstream pornography typically presents women as props for male sexual pleasure: receiving vaginal and anal sex, providing oral sex to men, and as participants in (or victims of) "double penetration" and gang rape" (Mikorski and Szymanski, 2017; p.259 Jensen, 2007). Men's high rates and normalization of pornography usage are concerning when considering the high level of objectification, aggression, and violence towards women depicted in such an increased number of videos and images. Men are often encouraged to freely express and embrace their sexuality through promiscuity and dominating women; however, women are often discouraged from expressing their sexuality and instead view themselves as sexual objects purely for male sexual desire (Mikorski and Szymanski, 2017). Studies have found that 87% of men have admitted to viewing pornography at least monthly and 58% admitted to using it weekly (Brem et. al., 2018; Carroll et. al., 2008);

with these statistics, it is fair to assume that under certain circumstances this sexual script is normalized to their viewers and are likely to be exercised in one's views in the greater society. Researchers have found that individuals who frequently view pornography tend to have more negative views towards women, intimacy, and relationships. Simmons et al. discusses this link:

Research indicates that men who view pornography have lower opinions of women (McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990) and more negative attitudes regarding intimate relationships (Oddone-Paolucci et. al., 2000) than men who do not view pornography. Likewise, female partners of these men often question their own value and self-worth (e.g., Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003; Schneider, 2000) (Simmons et. al., 2008, p. 408).

Mainstream media throughout society depict these aggressive and submissive undertones through music, advertisements, movies, television, and magazines to the point of encouraging and condoning masculine gender roles that over-sexualize and subordinate women. Another growing concern within society is how the exposure of aggressive pornography affects adolescents and the ever-increasing prevalence of adolescent dating aggression (ADA) or teenage dating violence (TDV). Multiple studies have investigated the link between the rise of younger viewers of pornography and the escalation of ADA and TDV. Rothman and Adhia state in their article,

Sexual relationship safety, the converse of adolescent dating abuse (ADA), is now recognized as one of the most pressing public health problems in the nation. Approximately 21% of girls and 10% of boys who attend high school in the U.S. experience either physical or sexual ADA each year (Rothman & Adhi, 2016, p. 2).

Throughout their article, “Adolescent Pornography Use and Dating Violence among a Sample of Primarily Black and Hispanic, Urban-Residing, Underage Youth”, they investigate the association with more frequent pornography use among youth and adolescent dating aggression victimization. Adolescents are often extremely impressionable as they learn the norms and expectations of the society around them. During this vulnerable time, many adolescents learn and explore their own sexuality and often look towards popular media for guidance. Statistics have shown that viewers of pornography are consistently becoming younger, leading researchers to assume that youth are turning to pornography for scripts on how to understand and navigate sexuality. This is a concern considering the high volume of aggressive and degrading content, and the impressionable position adolescents are in; they may have a hard time interpreting the unrealistic and often problematic impression of sexuality that pornography provides (Rostad et. al., 2019, p. 2138). Suppose youth are looking towards pornography for sexual scripts and consume a high quantity of aggressive and degrading content. In that case, they may begin to understand that this is the appropriate sexual script to follow, which may influence their own sexual behaviour and/or ideologies concerning

women, intimacy, and relationships. In fact, a study done by Rostad et. al. on the link between pornography and teen dating violence found that adolescents will look toward pornography as a model for education on sexual roles and behaviours (2019), they state, "Specifically, with increasing exposure to degrading and/or aggressive depictions of sexual relationships, these types of scripts are more likely to be activated and applied in real-life dating relationships" (Rostad et. al., 2019, p. 2144). These findings are troubling in terms of how our society is condoning toxic masculinity in our popular media to a point where this ideology and behavior may be internalized and established as a norm.

Mainstream pornography also creates an unrealistic idea of sexual relations and body standards. Many may turn to pornography as a sexual script which can create unrealistic expectations based on fantasy. Findings have shown those who have developed an unhealthy consumption of pornography will often have difficulties becoming aroused with genuine sexual relationships (Medical News Today, 2021). According to sexual script theory, those who use pornography with a high level of aggression may wrongfully assume that their partners are equally aroused by aggression and objectification. Brem et. al. found that 96% of the sexual and physical aggressions scenes in a content analysis depicted women expressing pleasure when aggressed upon (Brem et. al., 2021, p. 6086). Sexual objectification of women is a consistent pattern within pornography. Mikorski and Szymanski describe sexual objectification as "...viewing women as nonsentient beings that are often treated as objects and used by men for their sexual utility" (Mikorski and Szymanski, 2017, p. 258). Objectification not only has a problematic influence on the mindsets of men, but it also negatively impacts women's mindsets of themselves. Women who view sexually objectifying pornography may compare their physical appearance and sexual abilities to the individuals in the videos or images despite being unrealistic standards of beauty and sexual fantasies. Likewise, men who watched pornography depicting women being sexually objectified or aggressed upon were positively associated with sexual aggression (Wright et. al., 2016). Mikorski and Szymanski review the adverse psychological outcomes of sexual objectification on women, "Sexual objectification has been linked to a variety of negative psychological outcomes for women including internalization of this objectification, body shame, disordered eating, depression, and posttraumatic stress symptoms" (Mikorski & Szymanski, 2017, p. 257) These findings show that aggressive and degrading pornography negatively influences the mindsets of both men and women. There are concerns that these harmful ideologies towards women may lead individuals who consume violent pornography to act on these beliefs or sexual scripts, leading to intimate partner violence (IPV). Based on several studies, it is fair to assume a strong link between the consumption of aggressive pornography and toxic gender norms that condone hegemonic masculinity and the objectification and subordination of women. According to script theory, the more exposure individuals have to particular content, the more likely they will internalize and normalize these behaviours or beliefs. Therefore, those who consume aggressive and degrading pornography may use these videos and images as a template for their own sexual relationships and personal desires and thoughts.

How Pornography Influences the Prevalence and Opinions Surrounding IPV and ADA

The rapid rate of consumption of pornography and the high levels of violence, aggression, and sexual objectification of women within pornography has caused great concern over the ways in which society has standardized traditional masculine gender roles and sexual objectification of women. Malamuth et al. (2000) established a reliable connection between the utilization of aggressive pornography and sexually aggressive behaviours. Simmons et al. discusses several studies on this connection:

Likewise, in a meta-analysis of 46 studies addressing the effect of pornography on male behavior and attitudes, Oddone-Paolucci et al. (2000) found large positive effect sizes for the relationships between the sex industry and sexual deviancy, and between sex offense perpetration (e.g., rape) and belief in rape myths (2008, p. 407).

Researchers have been looking at the link between the high volume of aggressive pornographic content that reinforces traditional masculine gender norms and negative opinions towards women and relationships and how this may lead to intimate partner violence or adolescent dating aggression. It is believed that there are other factors that may influence someone to perpetuate gendered violence, one of the main factors that have a significant influence is substance abuse. In Shope's (2004) study of 271 women, she found that individuals who perpetrated intimate partner violence and were consistent consumers of pornography increased the risk of violence; however, the risk was significantly higher when alcohol and pornography were combined. Another factor that researchers investigated was one's inability to manage their own negative emotions. A study found that men who perpetrate violence against their partners or hold hegemonic masculine beliefs about women would often use pornography as a mechanism to navigate and regulate their negative emotions (Brem et. al., 2021). This, in turn, creates a dangerous cycle of a lack of emotional navigating skills being coped with pornography that reinforces violent sexual scripts and aggression against women and can often lead to intimate partner violence. These secondary factors intensify the risks of intimate partner violence along with the toxic and degrading views that one may adopt through the consumption of pornography. Many studies have found a link between intimate partner violence and the perpetrator's consumption of aggressive pornography. Brem et al. elaborates, "A number of cross-sectional and experimental studies spanning several decades suggested that pornography use, particularly by men, is positively associated with sexual aggression and violence-condoning attitudes toward women" (Brem et. al., 2021, p. 6086).

Findings show adolescent dating aggression is more prevalent in youth who consume more pornography, specifically watching explicit content that depicts women in submissive and aggressive situations. A study done by Rostad and colleagues found that "...exposure to violent pornography may be a significant correlate of all types of TDV perpetration and victimization, particularly for male adolescents" (Rostad et. al., 2018, p. 2144). Adolescents are at a highly susceptible and impressionable place in life where they are still trying to understand themselves as

an individual as well as the norms and expectations of the world around them. Sexuality can often be a confusing and challenging topic during this hormonal and changing period in a youth's life. Adolescents' inexperience and limited knowledge of appropriate sexual scripts may turn to pornography for education and on how to navigate how to think, feel and behave in an intimate situation. Youth may not understand that the sexual content depicted in most pornography is both an unrealistic and unhealthy representation of sexuality. If a youth is using pornography as a way of education and understanding on sexual relations and gender roles and consume violent pornography that portrays women in a subordinate position and victims of aggression and sexual objectification, they may assume and internalize this as expected; this then becomes their own expectations and norms regarding gender roles and sexual relations. This inexperience and lack of knowledge on healthy sexual relationships may lead adolescents to recreate what they see in sexually aggressive videos with their partners and think this is appropriate, normal sexual behaviour.

Hatch and colleagues found that youth who reported viewing violent pornography were 5.8X more likely to report sexual aggressive behavior later in life than those who did not view violent pornography. However, this study also found that youth who watched nonviolent pornography had comparable levels of sexual aggression over time when compared to youth who did not view pornography (Hatch et. al., 2020). In addition to believing that the behaviour and acts seen in violent pornography are the norms within sexual relationships, adolescents who watch pornography that is degrading to women may engender violent ideals towards women and are more likely to adopt traditional masculine gender norms and roles. Female youth who are exposed to violent pornography may assume that their gendered sexual roles revolve around being objectified and strictly available for male pleasure. These gender roles can be dangerous for both young girls and young boys. Exposure to violent and degrading pornography may lower young girls' self-esteem and self-worth when they compare their bodies to the women in the videos and their over-sexualized and objectified role in a sexual relationship. Young boys may also experience a drop in self-esteem if they were to compare themselves to the men in the videos and embrace and internalize a dangerous and problematic ideology on gender roles, sex, and relationships. Both boys and girls are at risk of adopting unrealistic and skewed views of sex and intimacy. Malamuth and Spinner state, "... these violent undertones in pornography may be problematic if these acts could become associated with sexual pleasure creating a conditioned effect that could make violence a meaningful part of the sexual experience" (Malamuth & Spinner, 1980, p. 227). Emily Rothman and colleagues developed a Pornography Literacy Program for Adolescents to educate youth on how to view pornography through a critical lens. The purpose is to "... improve adolescents' knowledge, attitudes and behavioral intentions related to pornography, healthy relationships and sexual consent" (Rothman et. al., 2020, p. 155). This program should be a critical part of sexual education to help youth understand that pornography is entertainment and not a template for navigating sexual experiences. What they are viewing is an unrealistic example of sexual relations. I believe that this form of education would help lower the rates of adolescent dating violence significantly and serve as a reminder that pornography is not something to compare oneself to because it is strictly a fantasy and is not a realistic depiction of bodies, behaviour, or sex.

Conclusion:

The sex industry in today's culture is bigger than ever. With the internet and growing cultural acceptance, users can access an endless array of sexually explicit content at anytime and anywhere they'd like. Studies have found an ever-growing rate of users; in fact, according to Pornhub.com, "In 2019 there were over 42 billion visits to Pornhub, which means there was an average of 115 million visits per day" (Pornhub.com, 2019). The sex industry is becoming more and more normalized within our society. Although this growth and normalization can be seen as a positive in many aspects, it also comes with several consequences regarding gender roles and norms and the prevalence of intimate partner violence and adolescent dating violence. Research has found that there is an astonishing level of violence within mainstream pornography. Brem and colleagues executed a content analysis of mainstream pornographic videos and found, 88% of scenes portrayed physical violence and 48% portrayed verbal aggressions; the study found that this violence and aggression was towards women 94% of the time (Brem et. al., 2018). These statistics are concerning considering the audience of pornography has become younger and younger. Throughout this paper, I used script theory to understand the relationship between gender norms and roles and the prevalence of intimate partner violence and adolescent dating violence with the consumption of aggressive and degrading pornography. According to script theory, when individuals are exposed to certain content, they begin to create a script for thinking and acting. This way of thinking and behaving is eventually internalized and seen as a norm within that individual's life. Therefore, when considering the large consumption of pornography where women are objectified and are consistently the targets of physical, verbal, and sexual aggressions, this way of thinking and behaving may become normalized and accepted as an appropriate way of thinking and behaving in terms of sexual intimacy. There is also growing concern about the ways that a large volume of pornographic content condones and encourages subordinating, degrading, and imposing aggression on women. According to script theory, exposure to these behaviours and ideologies may impact viewers' own opinions, beliefs, and understandings of gender roles. Research has found that males that are consistent consumers of pornography, along with other secondary factors (substance abuse, mental health, unhealthy emotional navigating), may have higher tendencies for violence against women, as well as holding beliefs that condone violence against women (Mikorski & Szymanski, 2016). These traditional masculine gender norms could lead to a higher level of intimate partner violence as well as displacing women within society.

Hegemonic masculinity is found throughout society and is consistently reinforced through popular media such as films, television, music, advertisements, and magazines. However, traditional gender roles displayed within a high quantity of pornographic videos and images add another deeper level of toxic masculinity through sexual aggression and subordination of women. This is a significant issue when it comes to adolescents and the impressionable and lack of knowledge they have on appropriate sexual behaviour and gender roles. Studies have shown that adolescents will turn towards pornography as education on how to think and behave in terms of intimacy and gendered roles. This has been proven problematic as many studies have found a positive correlation between the exposure of violent pornography and adolescent dating violence. Looking towards pornography does not provide realistic expectations or behaviour for these young people. Pornography, specifically videos, and images that depict aggression, also do not provide a positive example of consensual relations and realistic pleasure between parties. Adolescents who

view violent pornography may attempt to recreate what they saw in videos with their partners, leading to adolescent dating violence. Adolescent boys who view a high level of pornography may start to view women as sex objects, existing for strictly their own pleasure; they may also be more adherent to hegemonic masculine ideals (Mikorski & Szymanski, 2016, p. 259). Emily Rothman and colleagues constructed a pornography literacy program for adolescents to encourage youth to view pornography critically and discourage them from looking to it for education or understanding of sex and gender roles (Rothman et. al., 2020). The program also provides adolescents an understanding of ensuring that both parties are consenting to all and every act during sexual relations. I believe that this program should be a fundamental part of sexual education for youth. With the escalating rates of pornography consumption within our society and users becoming younger and younger, it is unrealistic to expect adolescents not to explore pornography, especially with the easy accessibility; providing education on navigating pornography through a critical lens could potentially lead to lowering adolescent dating violence, unrealistic expectations, and problematic gender role ideology. After reviewing the studies on the effects pornography has on our societal gender norms and the prevalence of intimate partner violence, while also considering script theory, I believe that pornography, along with additional factors, has the capability to negatively affect gender roles and norms as well as condoning violence against women, therefore normalizing it for many of their viewers. Collectively, the data shows that exposure to violent pornography leads consumers to internalize more toxic masculine ideologies, which in certain circumstances leads to violence. Although there is a need for additional research on the effects pornography has on both gender roles within society and whether pornography has a positive correlation with intimate partner violence, I believe that there is sufficient evidence to consider the issue to be problematic and in need of resolution. I believe we are making progress through acknowledgement of the issue as well as Rothman and colleagues, pornography literacy program which has the potential have an effective influence on the prevalence of adolescent dating aggression as well as providing realistic sexual education to youth.

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