

What is the **IMPACT** of
pornography on young people?

A **RESEARCH BRIEFING** for
educators

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Pornography is a critical issue facing young people today. Statutory guidance for Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England (DfE, 2019) states that by the end of secondary school, pupils should know that 'pornography presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, can damage the way people see themselves in relation to others and negatively affect how they behave towards sexual partners'. This briefing summarises some of the key research on the impact of pornography to support teachers and others in delivering this element of the curriculum.

To note

- This briefing draws particularly from the research exploring the impact of pornography on adolescents, although the impact on adults is also considered, given that a) it is plausible that something harming an adult would also harm a child, and b) RSE aims to support students' healthy relationships and sex both now and in the future.
- The findings of longitudinal studies and meta-analyses are given particular weight, given their methodological strengths (for example longitudinal studies can help to disentangle causality; for example, does viewing pornography lower relational satisfaction, or do relationship problems increase pornography use, or both?). Most associations found in the longitudinal studies cited here have also been found in cross-sectional research.
- There is now a large body of international research exploring the impact of pornography. As is normal within any research field, studies sometimes yield conflicting findings (for example, one study finding pornography reducing adolescents' sexual satisfaction, another not). This briefing aims to provide an accurate summary of general findings, notwithstanding a minority of conflicting results. Note also that a negative impact only need affect 'some people some of the time' (versus 'all people all of the time') to merit a public health response. Pornography literacy education as part of wider RSE is one element of a public health response to pornography.
- There are gaps in our knowledge which future research will likely address; in particular most research delineates impacts on males viewing pornography that is aimed at those with a heterosexual orientation. Equally, we know less about the impact of pornography aimed at LGBT+ audiences and about the impact of pornography on girls and women.
- This is not an exhaustive review – rather some key areas of impact have been selected and highlighted.

The nature of pornography

Understanding what pornography is available and viewed by young people is an essential starting point for thinking about its impact. It is well-known that pornography generally involves and promotes a narrow conception of attractiveness in both men and women. It also centres on sexual proficiency and prowess, and its particular versions of these – in porn scenes, people are typically capable of performing sex in any situation or position and for any length of time (for summaries of research on these elements of pornography see Wright et al., 2017 & Vandenbosch et al., 2018).

Of arguably greater concern, free online pornography often depicts violence, exploitation, humiliation and denigration, in most part towards women. For example, in a content analysis of 400 of the most popular free online pornography films, Klaassen and Peter (2015) found that 41% of professional videos depicted violence towards women (this figure dropped to 37% when films labelled 'amateur' were also included). The two most common forms of violence were spanking and gagging (inserting a penis very far into the mouth). Women's responses to this violence were for the most part neutral or positive. Men dominating women was also a common theme, as was women being instrumentalised (i.e. used as a sexual object whose own sexual pleasure is not important). A concerning minority of films depicted non-consensual or manipulative sex. A content analysis of gay male porn found less problematic content, although 16% of videos included spanking and 10% bondage or sadomasochism (Downing et al., 2014).

In a study exploring what adolescents and young adults actually view when they access porn (thereby complementing the content analyses), Davis et al. (2018) found that 70% frequently saw men portrayed as dominant (compared to 17% frequently seeing women as dominant); 36% frequently saw women being called names or slurs (compared to 7% frequently seeing men treated this way); 35% frequently saw 'consensual' violence towards women (compared to 9% frequently seeing this towards men); and 11% frequently saw non-consensual violence towards women (compared to 1% frequently seeing this towards men).

Sexism is not the only prejudice ingrained in much of pornography – it also appears to be the only media genre in which overt racism is still routine and accepted (Jensen, 2011). Demeaning stereotypes of women, girls and men of different ethnicities are promoted and sexualised. One content analysis found that videos with Asian and Latina women were more likely to depict aggression than those involving white and black women (Shor & Golriz, 2019). Another found black men more often portrayed as perpetrators of aggression than white men, and black women more often targets of aggression than white women (Fritz et al., 2020).

At its heart, pornography narrates sex as a quest for sexual pleasure via the viewing and use of other people's bodies. Sex is impersonal, often unequal, and other people are tools for one's own gratification. Values, ethics, and other parts of one's personhood are side-lined (Whisnant, 2010), as are other versions of sex, namely those that place relational connection (such as 'sexual chemistry') or intimacy as central.

Impact on feelings, attitudes and mental states

Several longitudinal studies have found that adolescents' pornography consumption is associated with subsequent increased sexual, relational and body dissatisfaction (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2014; Doornward et al., 2014). In a recent British Board of Film Classification survey (BBFC, 2020), 35% of children and young people surveyed who had seen porn and gave an opinion (total number = 539), agreed that 'I worry about what other people think of my body because I don't look like the actors you see in porn'. A meta-analysis drawing on both studies with adolescent and adult participants (Wright et al., 2017) found that pornography is associated with lower interpersonal satisfaction in males; the authors note that the agreement across cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental studies indicates that pornography is playing a causal role (versus the link being explicable as reduced satisfaction leading to higher porn use). Satisfaction is likely to be most impacted over the long- versus short-term (Leonhardt et al., 2019) and when pornography use is frequent (Wright et al., 2019).

Other longitudinal studies suggest a role for pornography in increasing adolescents' sexual preoccupation and a performance orientation towards sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008; Vandenbosch et al., 2018). The latter involves someone approaching sexual interactions with ambitions to 'excel' at various sexual positions and behaviours. Focussing on performance and one's body (Maas & Dewey, 2018) is likely to detract from feelings of sexual connection, embodiment and flow. For some individuals with preoccupying thoughts about pornography, this may tip into dependency or addiction (for a concise review of some relevant research on this see Peters, 2018).

Relatedly, research has also explored pornography's wider influence on sexual scripts. Sexual scripts are people's templates of typical and acceptable sexual interactions – in other words their default model of what sex (in the broadest sense) is and should comprise. Tomaszewska and Krahe (2016, 2018) found an association between pornography use and risky consensual sexual scripts (those involving alcohol use, casual sex, and ambiguous communication) in secondary school and university students. A meta-analysis by Tokunaga et al. (2019) drawing on data from 70 studies found that across different types of study, pornography was associated with impersonal sexual scripts. As with the previously cited meta-analysis, their findings were not consistent with this relationship simply coming down to individuals who are more interested in impersonal sex seeking out more pornography. Such sexual scripts correlate with more permissive attitudes towards sexual coercion and aggression (Tomaszewksa & Krahe, 2016, 2018), and as expected, these have also been found at increased levels following higher pornography consumption (for example, Malamuth et al., 2012). Converging with these findings, studies also find

pornography use associated with subsequent increases in objectified notions of women and sexism (Hald et al., 2013; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009b; Wright & Bae, 2015). In the BBFC (2020) survey cited, 41% of children surveyed who were aware of pornography agreed that 'watching porn makes people less respectful of the opposite sex'. Note that not everyone is at equal risk of these effects – pornography is most likely to increase sexist and aggressive attitudes in males already prone to such thinking (for example, Hald et al., 2013; Malamuth et al., 2012).

Key impacts on behaviour

Sadly, sexual harassment and coercion is not an uncommon experience for adolescent girls (and to a lesser extent, boys) in the UK today (Stanley et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012). Young people frequently make the links between this problem and the ubiquity of pornography (for example see Coy et al., 2013). Consistent with these perceptions and aligning with the attitudinal research above, longitudinal controlled studies following adolescents or young adults over time have found pornography consumption predictive of subsequent sexual coercion and aggression (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; D'Abreu & Krahe, 2014; Dawson et al., 2019; Thompson & Morrison, 2013; Tomaszewska & Krahe, 2018; Ybarra et al., 2011; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). For example, Ybarra et al. (2011) found that – after controlling for other relevant factors such as nonsexual aggression, witnessing violence and alcohol use – adolescent violent pornography use increased the risk of subsequent sexual aggression by nearly six times. Note that findings are clearer for violent than non-violent pornography. Theory and findings suggest that porn has this impact via its effect on attitudes and sexual scripts (for example, D'Abreu & Krahe, 2014; Tomaszewska & Krahe, 2018). The picture emerging from these studies is consistent with that from meta-analyses drawing together the results of cross-sectional, longitudinal or experimental studies that also involve adult participants (for example Wright et al., 2016; Allen et al., 1995).

Sexual experiences do not neatly divide into those that are desired and enjoyed, and those that comprise harassment, coercion or abuse. Many young people report unwanted sexual experiences that they consented to (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016). Qualitative studies suggest that porn can sometimes play a part in these, by creating expectations of various sexual acts that individuals then feel either a pressure from themselves or their partner to comply with (for example, BBFC, 2020; Marston & Lewis, 2014).

Also in keeping with the research on sexual scripts and attitudes, the findings of a separate set of longitudinal studies suggest that adolescent pornography use increases engagement in risky sex (for example, condomless) and casual sex (Koletic et al., 2019; Vandenberg & van Oosten, 2018). Again these findings chime with those of meta-analyses that look at overall pictures emerging from a wider set of studies, involving different designs and including adults (Tokunaga et al., 2019; 2020).

A small amount of longitudinal research has looked at whether young people's pornography use impacts their academic performance – so far one study indicates an impact (Beyens et al., 2015), whereas another does not (Sevic et al., 2020). The picture will no doubt be clarified by further research; at the current time, a precautionary approach seems sensible in which this potential risk informs educational approaches.

Additional impacts on other people

As we've explored already, an individual's pornography use does not occur in a 'bubble', but can impact other parts of their lives and the people around them. Not only does pornography seem to increase the likelihood of at least some individuals behaving sexually coercively or aggressively, research also indicates that it may reduce the chance of people intervening in risky situations as 'positive bystanders' (for example Foubert & Bridges, 2017). More indirectly, an individual's pornography use may contribute to sexual harassment and hostility via peer support of facilitative attitudes; for example, if a young person, as a consequence of their porn use, more strongly endorses and espouses hostile sexism, this can have a knock-on effect on the attitudes of his peers, which in turn increase their risk of sexual aggression (for example, Jaques-Tiura et al., 2015). This is termed the peer amplification effect.

Unsurprisingly, given the aforementioned research on pornography and relational satisfaction, longitudinal and meta-analytic studies also find a role for pornography in relationship break-ups. For example, Perry (2017) found that married individuals who viewed porn in 2006 were more than twice as likely to be separated by 2012 than others even after controlling for baseline marital happiness and sexual satisfaction. Whilst this is not true of all, many women and girls find the use of pornography by a male partner detrimental to their wellbeing and relational satisfaction (for example, Stewart & Syzmanski, 2012).

Beyond 'impact'

It is right that there is now considerable attention being paid to the impact of pornography on young people: how it may affect their feelings and attitudes, how it may influence their behaviour, opportunities and lives, as well as how it may affect and influence those they relate to. In parallel, however, there is a question around whether 'impact' should be the full story. Are there things about the very use of pornography (and its various types) that merit concern and attention, beyond its subsequent effects? Makin and Morczek (2016), for example, argue that searching for violent pornography online is in and of itself an act of (typically gendered) microaggression. Through searches and clicks, violent or degrading films are normalised and promoted, contributing to what has been termed 'rape culture' (Makin & Morczek, 2015). Violent or not, the majority of porn tells a story of sex as personal gratification, objectification, and performance; and largely missing from this story is relational connection, intimacy, or equality. When a person is consuming this version of sex, do they compromise or demote parts of who they are? What does it mean for their integrity, internal congruence, connection to humankind, or even dignity? These are ethical and existential questions which merit discussion, reflection and debate in academia, policy-making, and, perhaps above all, classrooms.

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