

## **Pornography**

The topic of pornography has been discussed from many vantage points and often hotly debated by scholars and researchers. Some have focused on the functions and effects of pornographic mass media as they pertain to understanding the impact of pornography on individual consumers. For example, some theorists have argued that the particular type of pornography an individual is attracted to may serve as a 'window to the mind,' revealing core developmental conflicts of the psyche (Stoller 1976). Others have considered the beneficial and/or negative effects of pornography on individuals in the realms of fantasy sex education, esthetic/artistic expression, sexual addiction, etc. (Gagnon 1977, Gordon 1980). Yet other scholars have approached the topic at a broader level, exploring such topics as the relevance of pornography to group relations, social institutions, and the role of government regulation (e.g., Strossen 1995, Weinstein 1999). Assertions have been made that pornography use contributes to unequal power relations between dominant and subordinate classes, particularly male subjugation of women (Itzin 1992). Others have claimed that pornography is a degrading threat to social institutions and values, such as the traditional family structure (Wojtyla 1981); and that it has functioned as an agent of social change (Sorokin 1956), even as a contributing factor to major social revolutions (Hunt 1993).

It is beyond the scope of this article to consider all of these diverse approaches to the topic of pornography. Instead, the focus here may be described as a 'social science-centered' approach revolving around two central questions: First, what are the findings of social scientific studies on the effects of pornography on men (who are much more likely than women to be the consumers of such media) in the areas of aggressive attitudes and behavior? Second, how can we under-

stand this major asymmetry in male vs. female consumption of pornography?

An extremely large media industry has existed for many years that sells sexually explicit material, including movies, magazines, books, videos, and, increasingly, Internet-based media. This 'pornography industry' was recently described by Forbes magazine as a \$56 billion global industry that has become much more mainstream in recent years. Some companies marketing very explicit portrayals on the Internet are now listed on the Nasdaq stock exchange (Morais 1999).

### 1. Defining Pornography

Pornography refers to sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience. Typical content consists of nudity and/or various sexual acts (e.g., intercourse, fellatio, etc.). Hunt (1993) notes that the production of media for this purpose is a relatively modern phenomenon, beginning toward the latter part of the nineteenth century. O'Toole (1999, p. 1) similarly argues that earlier in European history the use of sexually explicit depictions was primarily for political purposes, '... to satirise, criticise, to tilt at the Church, the state, the monarchy. ... Porn was controlled during this period not because it was obscene but because it was seditious, blasphemous, or defamatory.'

Pornography does not include sexual content that is 'embedded' or interwoven with much nonsexual content (e.g., a movie that primarily includes nonsexual content but also has one or a few sexual scenes). The research literature in that area has been recently summarized by Malamuth and Impett (2000). Sometimes the distinction between 'embedded' and explicit sexual content is not so clear. For example, *Playboy* magazine regularly includes considerable nonsexual content (e.g., interviews with politicians and jazz artists) as well as nude portrayals; the Starr Report, an official state document focusing on President Bill Clinton, included much sexually explicit content. Nevertheless, the focus here is on content that is primarily designed to sexually arouse the consumer.

In terms of legal definitions, the terms 'pornography' and 'obscenity' need to be distinguished. Obscenity refers to pornographic content that has been judged by the legal system to be illegal. In the USA, most states use the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Miller vs. California* as the legal definition of 'obscene.' To be judged obscene under this case the material must satisfy three conditions: (a) The average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; (b) the work depicts sexual conduct in a patently offensive way; and (c) the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

With increasing use of new types of media such as the Internet, there may be changes in the content of pornography and the feasibility that governments can restrict access to content considered by some as offensive or harmful. For example, Barron and Kimmel (2000) recently measured the levels of sexually violent content in representative samples of sexual magazine, video, and Internet sex stories sites. They found that the Internet content was significantly higher in violence than the videos or magazines. This difference was particularly high when considering 'extreme' forms of violence (e.g., use of weapon on a victim, torture, mutilation) where 17 percent of the Internet sites contained such material as contrasted with only 2 percent in the other media. Furthermore, the Internet content depicted men in dominant positions, as victimizer and not victim, in far greater proportion than magazines and videos. The authors note that the Internet is more 'democratic' than the other media, which are constrained by dependence on commercial advertisers. The researchers suggest the Internet content is '... as close as one can get to men's direct expressions of their own fantasies, unconstrained by the demands of the marketplace or the high costs of producing and distributing those fantasies to others' (p. 166). It should be noted, however, that the men who currently use such Internet sex sites may not be representative of the larger population and may have particular attraction to more aggressive content.

### 2. Research on the Effects of Sexually Explicit Media

#### 2.1 Differences Among Studies

Varied methodologies and dependent measures have been used to study the effects of pornography. Much research has centered on the potential link between pornography exposure and aggression, particularly sexual aggression. Most of the studies conducted within North America, may be described along two orthogonal dimensions based on whether they used experimental (random assignment to conditions) or correlational methodology, and whether the dependent variable they assessed was a response presumably affecting sexual aggression (e.g., attitudes supporting such aggression) or some measure of actual aggression. Such studies may therefore be organized into four categories: (a) experiments manipulating exposure to pornography and examining the effect upon attitudes as the dependent measure; (b) experiments manipulating exposure to pornography and assessing the impact on aggressive behavior as the dependent measure (in laboratory settings); (c) studies of the correlations between individual differences in pornography exposure in naturalistic settings and men's attitudes supporting aggression; and (d) two

types of studies examining the correlations between pornography exposure and aggressive behavior in naturalistic settings, those comparing criminals vs. noncriminals on pornography use, and within samples of noncriminals, those comparing different levels of reported past sexual aggression and individual variability in use of pornography.

Several meta-analyses of pornography systematically synthesize the research literature in three of the four categories and partly in the fourth category of study. Research correlating pornography use and sexual aggression within the noncriminal population has not yet been synthesized by a metanalytic review. Here, fortunately, a recent publication using a national representative sample of all men in some form of posthigh school education is available to help fill this void

Below is a summary of the findings of the various meta-analyses and the findings of the national study.

*2.1.1 Experiments on the effects of pornography on attitudes.* Allen et al. (1995a, 1995b) conducted a meta-analysis of experiments, both laboratory and field studies, on the effects of pornography exposure on attitudes. The meta-analysis revealed that across the various studies conducted, there was a significant though modest effect, with violent pornography resulting in significantly greater increase in attitudes supporting aggression than exposure to nonviolent pornography (although there was also some effect for both types of pornography exposure). Therefore, the overall data showed that exposure to pornography, under controlled conditions, does cause an increase in attitudes supporting sexual aggression.

*2.1.2 Experiments on the effects of pornography on laboratory aggression.* The meta-analysis of Allen et al. (1995a) concluded that men exposed to non-violent or violent pornography portraying sexual acts were more aggressive than those exposed to neutral content, in the laboratory research reviewed. In contrast, exposure to portrayals of nudity alone (without any sexual acts) resulted in reduced aggression in comparison to exposure to neutral content.

*2.1.3 Pornography and attitudes favoring sexual aggression in naturalistic settings.* Although correlational studies do not enable cause and effect conclusions, they often have the advantage of assessing responses occurring in naturalistic settings. Allen et al.'s (1995b) meta-analysis examined these studies. They found that there was a weak positive correlation that was judged not to be statistically significant between amount of exposure to pornography and atti-

tudes favoring sexual aggression. Therefore, the correlational data for attitudes in naturalistic settings did not yield supportive data for the conclusions emerging from the experimental studies conducted in controlled settings.

*2.1.4 Pornography and aggression in naturalistic settings.* Allen et al. (2000) conducted a meta-analysis focusing on the pornography use of convicted sex offenders as compared to those of men from the non-criminal general population. They examined several types of dependent measures: (a) frequency of pornography use; (b) age of first exposure; (c) the degree to which pornography was a direct prelude to some sexual act (masturbation, consensual sex, or forced sex); (d) and degree of sexual arousal, measured by direct genital measures of such arousal. The findings across all of the studies and measures combined did not show that criminality was associated with frequency of pornography exposure nor with age of first exposure. After viewing pornography, criminals were more likely than noncriminals to engage in some sexual acts such as masturbation, consensual, or criminal sex.

Finally, these investigators conducted a related meta-analysis examining the degree to which different types of stimuli affect people in laboratory settings. They focused on studies of physiological sexual arousal (assessed by direct genital measures) to various types of content. The researchers concluded that sexual criminals were generally more sexually aroused than noncriminals in laboratory studies examining physiological arousal to sexual stimuli. However, studies which separated portrayals of consenting and nonconsenting sex found that in comparison to non-criminals, sex criminals were more aroused by violent sex. By contrast, the difference was in the opposite direction with consenting sexual portrayals, with nonrapists showing relatively more sexual arousal. It should be noted that although criminals may be less aroused sexually by consenting depictions than non-criminals, the data on 'sexual acting out' (see above) suggest that they may still be more likely than noncriminals to engage in some sexual activity following exposure to either types of pornography exposure.

Although a meta-analysis has not been conducted on the few available studies examining among non-criminals the potential relationship in naturalistic settings between use of pornography and individual differences in self-reported sexual aggression, these few studies do point to a significant association (for a review see Malamuth et al. 2000). However, these few studies have some methodological limitations, which were rectified in a national probability study recently reported by Malamuth et al. (2000). This study found that for the majority of men, high

pornography use is not indicative of high risk for sexual aggression: Among those classified as being at relatively low risk for committing sexually aggressive acts (based on various measures previously found to predict such risk), there was only a small difference in sexually aggressive behavior between those who reported different levels of pornography use.

In contrast, pornography use was indeed a very good 'marker' of higher sexual aggression levels when these researchers considered a particular group of men: those who, based on the other measures of risk for sexual aggression, were previously determined to be at high risk. It was found that among these high-risk individuals, those who additionally were very frequent users of pornography were much more likely to have engaged in sexual aggression than their counterparts who consumed pornography less frequently. The researchers cautioned, however, that such data alone cannot be used to infer cause and effect conclusions, even if they are useful for risk assessment. They did speculate that:

associations between pornography consumption and aggressiveness toward women could be explained by a circular relationship between high coercive tendencies and interest in certain content in pornography, whereby aggressive men are drawn to the images in pornography that reinforce and thereby increase the likelihood of their controlling, impersonal, and hostile orientation to sexuality. The way relatively aggressive men interpret and react to the same pornography may differ from that of nonaggressive men. (Malamuth et al. 2000, p. 85)

## 2.2 Cross-cultural Comparisons

One of the most glaring apparent contradictions in the literature on pornography results from research conducted in different cultures (as well as using different methodologies). In research conducted primarily in Denmark (Kutchinsky 1970, 1991) and in Japan (Diamond and Uchiyama 1999) there has not been evidence of increased criminal sexual acts as a function of the wider availability of pornography. In commenting on such findings, Malamuth and Donnerstein (1984, p. 141) suggested some time ago that '... there may be considerable variations among individuals within a culture in susceptibility to media influences. Similarly, cultural factors may create major individual differences in the role and impact of media stimuli on members of differing societies.'

A similar point was also aptly made by Giglio (1985, pp. 289-90):

The cultural environment in each country is a factor to consider in understanding the prevailing public attitudes towards pornography. The Danes appear to enjoy a more natural approach to sex in general. Public nudity, for example, is more acceptable in Denmark than in the United States ... In a society where it is possible on a warm summer

Sunday to visit the Rosenborg Palace in the heart of Copenhagen and see dozens of partially nude women in the surrounding gardens, usually accompanied by family or friends, without the slightest public disturbance, lends credibility to Kutchinsky's theory that the Danes lack the sustaining desire for pornography to make it a profitable domestic business.

In keeping with the position that aggressive-sexual predispositions may moderate the impact of exposure to certain types of pornography, it would be expected that within countries such as Denmark, fewer men than in the USA are at high risk for sexual aggression. If this is correct, then the lack of an association between pornography use and sexual aggression would map nicely on to the findings we have obtained. Although we do not have direct evidence bearing on this issue, there are some potentially relevant data. Zak and Knack (in press) compared the levels of trust that people had for each other in various countries throughout the world. They found strong differences, with countries such as Denmark being at the very highest levels of trust between people, and these levels were considerably higher than in the USA. To the extent that such general levels of trust may also be associated with trusting between men and women (an important component of the measures used to assess risk for sexual aggression), men may be at relatively low levels of risk for sexual aggression in a society such as Denmark. Therefore, when considering the possible impact of pornography on individuals within a cultural context, it may be essential to take into account the larger context within which such exposure is embedded.

## 3. Gender Differences in Pornography Consumption

What is clear is that across all of the cultures that have been studied, substantial differences exist in the type of sexually explicit media men and women are more likely to be attracted to (for a review, see Malamuth 1996, Oliver 2000). Many studies provide evidence that large gender differences exist in the consumption of and gratification derived from sexually explicit media. For example, in comparison to women, men consume more regularly, are more sexually aroused by, have more favorable attitudes to, and react with less negative affect to, portrayals featuring nudity of the opposite sex and/or sexual acts devoid of relationship context (e.g., Bryant and Brown 1989, Laumann et al. 1994, Mosher and MacLan 1994, Stauffer and Frost 1976). In contrast, men are less likely than women to consume sexually explicit media that emphasize 'sexual communion' (e.g., sex accompanied by emotional closeness) and romance (e.g., Faust 1980, Krentz 1992, Lawrence and Herold 1988, Perse 1994). Various other related gender differences found in pornography research are summarized by Malamuth (1996).

### 3.1 Adaptive Problems and Sexual Media

These differences can be discussed using the theoretical framework of evolutionary psychology, which predicts when gender differences are or are not expected, their direction, and why they occur (Buss 1999). Generally, males and females are expected to have the same psychological mechanisms in domains where natural selection has favored a universal human adaptive solution. However, different mechanisms are expected to exist in domains in which males and females have recurrently encountered different evolutionary problems and/or where the 'optimal solutions' differed for the genders. Evolutionary theory predicts that sexuality is one of these domains. Somewhat different mating strategies probably evolved for males and females due to differences in maximum reproductive capability and parental investment. The consumption of sexually explicit media might be the result of differing evolved psychological mechanisms interacting with environmental factors.

As Malamuth (1996) discusses in some detail, there appears to be a high correspondence between the adaptive problems that evolutionary psychologists have argued underlies a 'short-term' mating strategy and the recurrent content of sexually explicit media primarily consumed by men. According to evolutionary psychologists, males who engaged in ancestral environment in a short-term sexual strategy faced problems about how to get access to as many fertile females as possible while minimizing the commitment and investment to any one woman. Pornography marketed towards males primarily portrays casual sex with numerous, accessible women who display fertility cues through age and body shape. There is similarly a high level of correspondence between female-oriented sexual media (e.g., romance novels, portrayals of sex within a relationship context) and the adaptive problems that led females to evolve a long-term sexual strategy. These problems included identifying and securing commitment from a man who had the ability (e.g., high status) and willingness to invest heavily in her and her offspring. Additionally, due to the increased vulnerability associated with pregnancy and childbirth, females preferred to mate with men who could offer physical protection. Finally, women attempted to identify men who were kind and sensitive, responses that may be strong cues of parenting skills. Romance novels, one of the most popular forms of sexually explicit media for women, frequently portray a woman securing a relationship with a high status, physically protective male who also possesses parenting skills and the willingness to invest time and resources in a single female and her offspring.

In contrast, some researchers have argued that the gender differences described above can be explained exclusively as a product of the differing socialization of males' and females' cultural roles. While this process of socialization is probably relevant to these and many

other gender differences, such a model needs to consider why such norms and rules of socialization emerged in the first place as well as to account for a large number of other related gender differences in the area of sexuality (Buss and Schmitt 1993).

### 4. Concluding Comments

Pornography research has often been influenced by ideological/political perspectives with vested interests in particular conclusions. This may have led to framing of research questions and design of some studies in ways that encourages simple conclusions, while not readily accommodating more nuanced conclusions (Linz and Malamuth 1993). Nevertheless, research in this area has progressed considerably. In future work, it is essential not to use an 'either-or' lens in which research is cast simply into questions such as whether pornography exposure is generally harmful or not. As suggested in the research summarized here, depending on such factors as the cultural milieu, the individual's background, the particular content of the stimuli, the type of responses focused on, the content of exposure, the consumer's environmental circumstances, and the way 'harm' is defined, differing conclusions may result. Some may wish for a 'one handed' set of conclusions, but the research more accurately justifies a 'multihanded' perspective that reveals the richness and complexity of the issues related to the study of pornography.

*See also:* Aggression in Adulthood. Psychology of; Freedom of the Press: Internet: Psychological Perspectives; Media Effects on Children: Media Ethics; Rape and Sexual Coercion: Regulation: Sexual Behavior: Sexual Attitudes and Behavior: Sexual Behavior: Sociological Perspective: Violence and Media

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## Positivism, History of

Positivism is the name of a social and intellectual movement that tried to learn from the mistakes of the Enlightenment project that eventuated, first, in the Reign of Terror following the French Revolution of 1789, and second, in the irrationalism of the Weimar Republic following Germany's defeat in World War I. While it has been customary to distinguish between the quasipolitical movement called 'positivism' originated by Auguste Comte in the 1830s and the more strictly philosophical movement called 'logical positivism' associated with the Vienna Circle of the 1930s, both shared a common sensibility, namely, that the unchecked exercise of reason can have disastrous practical consequences. Thus, both held that reason needs 'foundations' to structure its subsequent development so as not to fall prey to a self-destructive scepticism. In this respect, positivism incorporates a heretofore absent empiricist dimension to the risk-averse orientation to the world historically associated with Platonism.

### 1. Positivism's Platonic Political Roots

In terms of Western intellectual history, positivism inflects Plato's original philosophical motivation through a secularized version of the Christian salvation story, in which Newton functions as the Christ figure. This captures both the spirit of Auguste Comte's original project and its residual effects in twentieth century logical positivism, which dropped the overt historicism of Comte's project, while retaining the fixation on Newton as the model for what it means to express oneself scientifically and a vague belief that greater scientific knowledge will deliver salvation. Indeed, positivism's core conceptual problem has been to define a scientific vanguard capable of both offering guidance to the unenlightened and itself

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