

Research on Pornography

A study done by one of the most well-regarded researchers in the field found that “high pornography consumption added significantly to the prediction of sexual aggression.”¹

A meta-analysis of 46 published research studies on the effects of pornography on sexual perpetration, attitudes regarding intimate relationships, and attitudes regarding the rape myth found that exposure to pornographic material puts one at increased risk for committing sexual offenses, experiencing difficulties in one’s intimate relationships, and accepting rape myths (i.e. beliefs that trivialize rape or blame the victim for the crime). Specifically, there is a 22% increase in sexual perpetration; a 20% increase in negative intimate relationships; and a 31% increase in believing rape myths. A total sample size of 12,323 people comprised the present meta-analysis. The studies confirmed the link between increased risk for negative development when exposed to pornography.²

Another meta-analysis examined 30 different studies with a total of 2,040 participants and concluded that exposure to pornography increases behavioral aggression. While there are many factors that influence this effect (for example, the content of the pornography viewed), the researchers conclude that a connection between exposure to pornography and subsequent behavioral aggression exists.³

The relationship between frequent pornography consumption and sexually aggressive behavior is especially strong for those with the highest “predisposing” risk level for sexual aggression. Those who are at high risk for sexual aggression and who frequently consume pornography have sexual aggression levels that are four times higher than those who do not consume pornography frequently.⁴

¹ Vanessa Vega and Neil M. Malamuth, “Predicting Sexual Aggression: The Role of Pornography in the Context of General and Specific Risk Factors,” *Aggressive Behavior*, Volume 33 (2007): pp. 104–117.

² Elizabeth Oddone-Paolucci, Mark Genuis and Claudio Violato, *The Changing Family and Child Development*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 48-59.

³ M. Allen, D. D'Alessio, and K. Brezgel, "A Meta-Analysis Summarizing the Effects of Pornography II," *Human Communication Research*, Vol. 22, Number 2 (December, 1995): pp. 258-283.

⁴ Neil Malamuth, T. Addison, and J. Koss, "Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Are there Reliable Effects and Can We Understand Them?" *Annual Review of Sex Research*, Vol. 11 (2000): pp. 26-94.

Based both on the lab research and interviews with women, Dr. Diana Russell has argued that pornography is a causal factor in the way that it can: (1) predispose some males to desire rape or intensify this desire; (2) undermine some males' internal inhibitions against acting out rape desires; (3) undermine some males' social inhibitions against acting out rape desires; and (4) undermine some potential victims' abilities to avoid or resist rape.⁵

Robert Jensen, based on interviews with pornography users and sex offenders, and the work of other researchers, concludes that pornography can: (1) be an important factor in shaping a male-dominant view of sexuality; (2) be used to initiate victims and break down their resistance to unwanted sexual activity; (3) contribute to a user's difficulty in separating sexual fantasy and reality; and (4) provide a training manual for abusers.⁶

A survey of women leaving abusive male partners found that 75% were shown pornography and asked or forced to enact scenes from it; 64% had pornography described to them and were asked or force to replicate the acts; 31% had been asked to pose for pornographic pictures, and 81% had been raped. "The study found a strong association between men's use of violent pornography and the physical abuse of women."⁷

Analysis of women's letters posted online revealed two themes regarding pornography consumption and its impact on sexual desire. First, many of the women believed they were no longer sexually attractive to their partners and this was the reason why sexual relations had diminished. Secondly, in relationships where sexual relations had continued despite the partner's pornography use, women believed they were viewed more as sexual objects than real people in the relationship.⁸

"Women are harmed, both indirectly and directly, by pornography. The images of coercion and violence represent reality in many women's lives. Therefore, an indirect consequence of these

⁵ D. E. H. Russell, *Dangerous relationships: Pornography, misogyny, and rape* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), p. 121.

⁶ Gail Dines and Robert Jensen, "Pornography and Media: Toward a more critical analysis," in *Sexualities: Identity, behavior, and society*, ed. M. S. Kimmel and R. F. Plante, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ E. Carmer, L. McFarlane, B. Parker, K. Soeken, C. Silva, and S. Reel. "Violent pornography and the abuse of women: Theory to practice," *Violence and Victims*, Volume 13, Number 4 (1998): pp. 319-332.

⁸ Raymond M. Bergner and Ana J. Bridges, "The Significance of Heavy Pornography Involvement for Romantic Partners: Research and Clinical Implications", *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, Vol. 28, Number 3, (2002): pp. 193-206.

pornographic images is the cumulative dissonance of emotional distress; anger, depression, disgust, confusion, and fear towards a loved one...These paradoxical emotional experiences are further trivialized, when these women witness their lives presented as mere entertainment, and more importantly, as normative intimate sexual relationships....“Increasingly, Asian American immigrant women report concerns about spousal use of pornography. Concerns that emerge as consistent barriers are the gender constraints of traditional male entitlement and women’s obligation to serve their husbands respectfully in order to maintain family honor. For men, this means expecting nothing less than their self-prescribed desires. For women, this means, not challenging or refusing their partner’s desire for pornography.... Women report a loss of intimacy when their partners engage in Internet pornography, as well as being in severe conflict and feeling “unclean” when asked to perform sexually debasing acts.... Racially constructed norms of female beauty that portray mostly White women present two self-effacing dilemmas.... Asian women are likely to feel that they cannot compete with the prevailing standards of beauty ... With little experience in sexual relationships, they feel pressured to compete with White women who seem to enjoy the sex depicted, ‘know’ what they want, and how to please men.... [T]hey frequently blame themselves for not being able to provide what their husbands want instead of feeling entitled to challenge their husband’s misogynistic and dehumanizing choices.”⁹

There is a relationship between pornography consumption and believing rape myths. Rape myths pertain to erroneous and potentially harmful ideas regarding rape, for example, that victims of rape are partially to blame for the crime, rapists should not get tough sentences, or rape is not a serious crime. This study found that violent pornography increased the acceptance of rape myths, and non-violent pornography increased the acceptance of rape myths when compared to a control group.¹⁰

This experiment distinguished between degrading non-violent pornography and erotica and compared their effects. Subjects were exposed to one of three types of sexual material over three viewing sessions, or to no material. The sexual materials were constructed from existing commercially available videos and validated by measuring subjects’ perceptions of them. The experiment revealed that the viewing of both the non-violent dehumanizing materials as well as the violent materials resulted in male subjects reporting a significantly greater likelihood of engaging in rape or other coercive sex acts than the control group.¹¹

⁹ Eunjung Ryu , “Spousal Use of Pornography and Its Clinical Significance for Asian-American Women: Korean Women as an Illustration.” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, Vol.16, Issue 4 (Dec 31, 2004): p. 75.

¹⁰ Mike Allen, Tara Emmers, Lisa Gebhardt, and Mary A. Giery, “Exposure to Pornography and Acceptance of Rape Myths,” *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 45, Number 1. (Winter 1995): pp. 5-14.

¹¹ James Check and Ted Guloein, “Reported proclivity for coercive sex following repeated exposure to sexually violent pornography, non-violent dehumanizing pornography, and erotica” in *Pornography: Recent Research, Interpretations, and Policy Considerations*, ed. Dolf Zillman and Jennings Bryant, pp. 159-184 (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum).

Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant have studied the effects of what they refer to as "massive exposure" to pornography: 4 hours and 48 minutes per week over a period of six weeks. These researchers focused on the effects of non-violent pornography. Male subjects in the massive exposure condition viewed 36 non-violent pornographic films over six weeks; male subjects in the intermediate condition saw 18 movies, three per week. The control group saw 36 non-pornographic movies. Numerous findings resulted. First, a desire for stronger material was fostered in their subjects. "Consumers graduate from common to less common forms of pornography," Zillman maintains, that is, to more violent and more degrading material. This research suggests that pornography can create a desire for the more abusive types of pornography in men who previously had no such desire.

Second, "males' sexual callousness toward women was significantly enhanced" (p. 117). For example, the subjects became increasingly accepting of statements such as "A woman doesn't mean 'no' until she slaps you"; "A man should find them, fool them, fuck them, and forget them"; and "If they are old enough to bleed, they are old enough to butcher." A marked increase in males' acceptance of male dominance in intimate relationships was yet another result. The idea that women are or should be equal in intimate relationships was more likely to be abandoned by these male subjects. Finally, their support of the feminist movement also declined sharply (p. 134).

After the same three weeks of "massive exposure," subjects were told that they were participating in an American Bar Association study that required them to evaluate a trial in which a man was prosecuted for the rape of a female hitchhiker. At the end of this mock trial various measures were taken of the subjects' opinions about the trial and about rape in general. For example, they were asked to recommend the prison term they thought most fair. The male subjects who were exposed to the massive amounts of pornography considered rape a less serious crime than they did before they were exposed to it; they thought that prison sentences for rape should be shorter; and they perceived sexual aggression and abuse as causing less suffering for the victims, even in the case of an adult male having sexual intercourse with a 12-year-old girl. The researchers concluded that "heavy exposure to common non-violent pornography trivialized rape as a criminal offense" (p. 117).¹²

Several studies have shown that portrayals of women enjoying rape and other kinds of sexual violence can lead to increased acceptance of rape myths in both males and females. One group of college students were shown a pornographic depiction in which a woman was portrayed as sexually aroused by sexual violence, and a second group was exposed to control materials. Subsequently, all subjects were shown a second rape portrayal. The students who had been exposed to the pornographic depiction of rape were significantly more likely than the students in the control group (1) to perceive the second rape victim as suffering less trauma; (2) to believe

¹² Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, "Effects of massive exposure to pornography" in *Pornography and Sexual Aggression*, ed. Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein, pp. 115-138, (New York: Academic Press, 1984).

that she actually enjoyed it; and (3) to believe that women in general enjoy rape and forced sexual acts.¹³

Males' internal inhibitions against acting out their desire to rape can be undermined if they consider male violence against women to be acceptable behavior. Viewing portrayals of sexual violence that has positive consequences increases male subjects' acceptance of violence against women. Examples of some of the attitudes used to measure acceptance of interpersonal violence include:

"Being roughed up is sexually stimulating to many women."

"Sometimes the only way a man can get a cold woman turned on is to use force."

"Many times a woman will pretend she doesn't want to have intercourse because she doesn't want to seem loose, but she's really hoping the man will force her."

Other rape myths that male subjects are more likely to believe after viewing pornography are:

"A woman who goes to the home or the apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex." "Any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants to."

"Many women have an unconscious wish to be raped, and many then unconsciously set up a situation in which they are likely to be attacked."

"If a girl engages in necking or petting and she lets things get out of hand, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her."¹⁴

One study of high school students found very high rates of "rape supportive beliefs", that is, acceptance of rape myths and violence against women. The boys who were the most frequent consumers of pornography and/or who reported learning a lot from it, were more accepting of rape supportive beliefs than their peers who were less frequent consumers and/or who said they had not learned as much from it. A full 25% of girls and 57% of boys indicated belief that in one or more situations, it was at least "maybe okay" for a boy to hold a girl down and force her to have intercourse. Further, only 21% of the boys and 57% of the girls believed that forced intercourse was "definitely not okay" in any of the situations. Forced intercourse was most accepted was that in which the girl had sexually excited her date. In this case 43% of the boys and 16% of the girls stated that it was at least "maybe okay" for the boy to force intercourse.¹⁵

"After only 10 minutes of exposure to aggressive pornography, particularly material in which women are shown being aggressed against, you find male subjects are much more willing to

¹³ Neil Malamuth and James Check. "The effects of aggressive pornography on beliefs in rape myths: Individual differences." *Journal of Research in Personality*, 19 (1985), pp. 299-320.

¹⁴ John Briere, Neil Malamuth, and James Check. "Sexuality and rape-supportive beliefs," *International Journal of Women's Studies*, Issue 8 (1985): pp. 398-403.

¹⁵ Kristin Maxwell and James Check, "Adolescents' rape myth attitudes and acceptance of forced sexual intercourse." Paper presented at the Canadian Psychological Association Meetings, Quebec, June 1992.

accept these particular myths ... These males are also more inclined to believe that 25% of the women they know would enjoy being raped.¹⁶

Students were randomly assigned to view either a feature-length film that portrayed violence against women as being justifiable and having positive consequences ("Swept Away", "The Getaway") or a film without sexual violence. The experiment showed that exposure to the sexually violent movies increased the male subjects' acceptance of interpersonal violence against women. This outcome did not occur with the female subjects. These effects were measured several days after the films had been seen.¹⁷

In a study of 89 non-incarcerated sex offenders conducted by William Marshall, "slightly more than one-third of the child molesters and rapists reported at least occasionally being incited to commit an offense by exposure to forced or consenting pornography". Exactly a third of the rapists who reported being incited by pornography to commit an offense said that they deliberately used pornography in their preparation for committing the rape. The comparable figure for child molesters was much higher--53% versus 33%. However, as these sex offenders appear to have used the pornography to arouse themselves after they had already decided to commit an offense, it could be argued that it was not the pornography that incited them. To what extent they actually required the pornography in order to commit their offenses, like some perpetrators require alcohol, we do not know. Even if these perpetrators were eliminated from the data analysis, however, that still leaves 66% of the rapists and 47% of the child molesters who claimed that they were at least sometimes incited by pornography to commit an offense.¹⁸

The use of pornography by 256 perpetrators of sexual offenses, all of whom were undergoing assessment and treatment, was investigated. 56% of the rapists and 42% of the child molesters implicated pornography in the commission of their offenses.¹⁹

¹⁶ Edward Donnerstein. Unpublished transcript of testimony to the Public Hearings on Ordinances to Add Pornography as Discrimination against Women. Committee on Government Operations, City Council, Minneapolis, MN, pp. 4-12.

¹⁷ Neil Malamuth and James Check. "The effects of mass media exposure on acceptance of violence against women: A field experiment," *Journal of Research in Personality*, 15 (1981): pp. 436-446.

¹⁸ Edna Einsiedel, Social Science Report. Paper prepared for the Attorney's General's Commission on Pornography, Department of Justice, Washington, DC (1986).

¹⁹ Gene Abel, Mary Mittleman, and Judith Becker. "Sexual offenders: Results of assessment and recommendations for treatment," in *Clinical Criminology: The Assessment and Treatment of Criminal Behavior*, ed. Mark Ben-Aron, Stephen Hucker, and Christopher Webster, pp. 191-205 (Toronto: Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, 1985).

Neil Malamuth suggests several processes by which sexual violence in the media "might lead to attitudes that are more accepting of violence against women".

1. Labeling sexual violence more as sexual rather than a violent act.
2. Adding to perceptions that sexual aggression is normative and culturally acceptable.
3. Changing attributions of responsibility to place more blame on the victim.
4. Elevating the positive value of sexual aggression by associating it with sexual pleasure and a sense of conquest.
5. Reducing negative emotional reactions to sexually aggressive acts.²⁰

Previous research findings have indicated that both alcohol intoxication and violent pornography exposure may contribute to increased sexual aggression by men. This study examined the effects of a moderate alcohol dose, alcohol-related beliefs, and victim response on men's self-reported likelihood of committing sexual aggression. Male social drinkers read an eroticized rape depiction after completing an alcohol administration protocol. The stimulus story varied on whether the victim, who initially expressed unwillingness to engage in sexual activity, expressed pleasure or distress in response to the man physically forcing her to perform several explicit sex acts. Participants' self-reported likelihood of behaving like the sexual aggressor in the story was directly related to their own sexual arousal. Heightened sexual arousal was reported by participants who had consumed alcohol, those who read the victim-pleasure story, and those who believed that drinking women are sexually vulnerable. Results suggest that sexual arousal to violent pornography, as influenced by acute alcohol intoxication and other factors, may be an important component of men's perceptions of their own sexual aggression likelihood.²¹

Researchers have proposed that if statements made by convicted rapists alleging that contact with pornography influenced their sexual aggression were true, that revelation would help validate the pornography-rape connection. In this study, polygraph was used to determine whether the sexual offenders were truthful or deceptive. The focus question for the polygraph tests was, Do you believe pornography had anything to do with the sexual act for which you were convicted? The polygraph results determined that more than 66% of the convicted sexual offenders told the truth when asked their opinion on whether they believed pornography was associated with the sexual act for which they were convicted.²²

²⁰ Neil Malamuth (1986). "Do sexually violent media indirectly contribute to anti-social behavior?" Paper prepared for the Surgeon General's Workshop on Pornography and Public Health, Arlington, VA.

²¹ Kelly Cue Davis, Jeanette Norris, William H. George, Joel Martell, and Julia R. Heiman. "Men's likelihood of sexual aggression: the influence of alcohol, sexual arousal, and violent pornography." *Aggressive Behavior*, Vol. 32, Issue 6 (Nov. 2006), pp. 581-589.

²² Glenn A. Walp and U. Walden, "The missing link between pornography and rape: Convicted rapists respond with validated truth." *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol 66(7-A), 2006, p. 2734.

Childhood exposure to pornography is significantly related to rape fantasies and rape-supportive beliefs in female adults. Rape-supportive beliefs include thoughts that trivialize rape as a crime, normalize rape as a behavior, and/or hold the victim partially responsible for being raped. Rape-supportive beliefs can negatively affect the reporting of rape crimes, the sentencing of rapists, and the support offered to victims.²³

A telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 1500 youth internet users aged 10 to 17 years found that forty-two percent had been exposed to online pornography in the past year. Of those, 66% reported only unwanted exposure. Unwanted exposure rates were higher for teens, youth who reported being harassed or sexually solicited online or interpersonally victimized offline, and youth who scored in the borderline or clinically significant range for depression.²⁴

This study investigated whether being charged with a child pornography offense is a valid diagnostic indicator of pedophilia. The results suggest child pornography offending is a stronger diagnostic indicator of pedophilia than is sexually offending against child victims.²⁵

Both adult and child pornography is used in organized abuse of children in sex rings, where child pornography is then often made of the abuse. Records of child sexual abuse in photographs and on film are used to blackmail abused children to prevent them disclosing the abuse and to force them to abuse other children.²⁶

²³ Shawn Corne, John Briere, and Lillian M. Esses, "Women's Attitudes and Fantasies about Rape as a Function of Early Exposure to Pornography," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 7, Number 4 (December 1992): pp. 454-461.

²⁴ Janis Wolak, Kimberly Mitchell, and David Finkelhor, "Unwanted and Wanted Exposure to Online Pornography in a National Sample of Youth Internet Users," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 119, Issue 2 (Feb 2007): pp. 247-257.

²⁵ Michael C. Seto, James M. Cantor, and Ray Blanchard, "Child Pornography Offenses Are a Valid Diagnostic Indicator of Pedophilia," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 115, No. 3 (2006): pp. 610-615.

²⁶ Ann Wolbert Burgess, Nicholas A Groth, and Maureen P. McCausland, "Child Sex Initiation Rings," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Volume 51, Number 1, (Jan 1981): pp. 110-119. A. W. Burgess, C. R. Hartman, and A. McCormack, "Abused to abuser: antecedents of socially deviant behaviors." *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Volume 144 (Nov 87): pp. 1431-6. Patricia Hunt and Margaret Baird, "Children of Sex Rings." *Child Welfare*, Vol. 69, Issue 3 (May/June 1990).

Child pornography is now generally included in the definition of child sexual abuse.²⁷

Further evidence linking child sexual abuse and pornography is provided by research and clinical work with sex offenders. In a sample of non-incarcerated sex offenders, a third of the rapists, and over half of those who committed child sexual abuse, said they deliberately used pornography in preparation for committing the offence. Work with sex offenders has shown that for a substantial proportion of offenders, pornography can be implicated at every stage: in predisposing men to commit abuse, in legitimizing and normalizing abuse, in creating and reinforcing false belief systems about victims of abuse, in reducing internal and external inhibitions to abuse and in initiating and carrying out abuse.²⁸

Thirty-eight percent of a sample of 200 prostituted women described having been “involved in the taking of sexually explicit photographs of themselves when they were children for commercial purposes, and/or the personal gratification of the photographer.” Ten percent had been used as children in pornographic films and magazines, all of them under the age of 13 when they were victimized. Twenty-two per cent of the 178 cases of juvenile sexual exploitation mentioned the use of pornographic materials by the adult prior to the sexual act; this included both adult and child subjects for purposes of their own and the child's sexual arousal, to legitimize their action and to persuade the child to participate.²⁹

In a survey of over 4000 readers of the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* in the UK, 13% of respondents reported having been sexually abused as children by different family members and by their friends in a range of different circumstances many of which involved pornography. A review of the notes of 78 children who contacted Childline over a 6-month period revealed that for 32 of them their sexual abuse was linked to either being shown pornographic magazines or videos or becoming involved in the making of abusive videos. In Germany, police have estimated that 130,000 children are forced by parents or other close acquaintances to participate in the production of pornography.³⁰

²⁷ Liz Kelly, “Pornography and Child Sexual Abuse,” in *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*, ed. Catherine Itzin, p. 113-124 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²⁸ W. L. Marshall, “Pornography and sex offenders,” in *Pornography: Research advances and policy considerations*, ed. Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, pp. 185-214 (Hillsdale, NJ, England: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1989). Daniel Lee Carter, Robert Alan Prentky, Raymond A. Knight, Penny L. Vanderveer, and Richard J. Boucher, “Use of Pornography in the Criminal and Developmental Histories of Sexual Offenders,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Volume 2, Issue 2 (June 1987): pp. 196-211.

²⁹ Mimi H. Silbert and Ayala M. Pines, “Early Sexual Exploitation as an Influence in Prostitution,” *Social Work*, (July/August 1983): pp. 285-289. Wyre R. 1992. “Pornography and sexual violence: working with sex offenders,” in *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*, ed. Catherine Itzin, pp. 236-48, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³⁰ Catherine Itzin, "Pornography and the Organization of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse: Developing a Conceptual Model." *Child Abuse Review*, Vol. 10 (2001): pp. 35–48. Liz Kelly, "Weasel words: paedophiles and the cycle of abuse," *Trouble and Strife*, volume 33 (1996): pp. 44–49.