

## PORNOGRAPHY USE AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Given the increasing availability of pornography on the internet and in other media sources, the issue of pornography use in the context of relationships may be relevant to many couples at some point in their lives. In this issue of Check the Research, studies that explore the link between pornography use and relationship satisfaction will be discussed. For the purposes of this overview, recent research that focuses on heterosexual couples will be considered. The questions raised by this area of research focus on the attitudes of heterosexual couples towards pornography use, and whether pornography is considered a threat or an enhancement to sexual enjoyment and happiness in a relationship.

### WHAT IS PORNOGRAPHY?

The definition of pornography may vary according to a number of factors such as culture, religion, sexual orientation, and gender. In many research studies participants are not given a clear definition of pornography and so they respond to questions based on their own understanding of what constitutes pornography. In general, pornography refers to sexually explicit material that may be produced in various forms (i.e. electronic, print, visual) for the purpose of sexual arousal. However, what is considered pornographic will vary according to the individual and will change over time. Some people prefer to distinguish between erotica, which is usually considered to convey a positive and healthy view of sexuality, and pornography, which many see as promoting a view of sexuality that is demeaning and degrading, especially to women. There is no legal definition of pornography in Canadian law, but rather there is mention of obscenity in the Canadian Criminal Code. The Code specifies that “any publication, a dominant characteristic of which is the undue exploitation of sex, or of sex and any one or more of the following subjects, namely, crime, horror, cruelty and violence, shall be deemed to be obscene” (Casavant & Robertson, 2007, p.5). Researchers note that the measures by which material is judged to be obscene are always changing to reflect evolving community standards (Casavant & Robertson).

“WHAT HAS BEEN DENOTED PORNOGRAPHY HAS VARIED OVER TIME: IN THE 1960S, SO CALLED “MEN’S MAGAZINES” THAT SHOWED PICTURES OF WOMEN’S BARE BREASTS OR PICTURES OF NAKED WOMEN FROM A DISTANCE WAS CONSIDERED PORNOGRAPHY. IN THE 1970S, GENITALS WERE PORTRAYED IN PORNOGRAPHY AND, IN THE 1980S, PICTURES OF PEOPLE HAVING SEXUAL INTERCOURSE EMERGED.”

(Daneback, Traeen, & Mansson, 2009, p. 746)

### PORNOGRAPHY AND RELATIONSHIPS

In a recent Canadian study of 340 women, aged 18 to 41, participants were questioned about pornography use and relationship satisfaction (Resch & Alderson, 2013). Participants were recruited from a university in western Canada and were women aged 18 years and older who were in committed heterosexual relationships with partners who used pornography. The online survey included questions about the mutual use of pornography, whether or not women perceived that their partners were honest about pornography use, and the levels of reported distress and relationship satisfaction attributed to pornography use. Distress was defined as the presence of disturbing perceptions associated with pornography, such as the belief that pornography use is a form of infidelity.

Resch and Alderson (2013) found that participants who believed that their partners were honest about pornography use reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Those who believed that their partners were not open about pornography use reported more relationship dissatisfaction and personal distress. Mutual pornography use was not



associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction. However, those women who rarely or never used pornography with their partners reported higher levels of distress than those who reported more frequent mutual use of pornography. The authors found that honesty about pornography use was generally associated with greater levels of relationship satisfaction, however relationship satisfaction actually decreased when male partners were frequently disclosing their use of pornography. Resch and Alderson speculate that women may feel threatened by their partners' frequent use of pornography. Women may fear that they are constantly being compared to females depicted in porn, and they may resent their partners being aroused by images of other women. A limitation of the study was that participants were not asked about the frequency of pornography use by male partners, so there was no way of knowing if the men were using pornography on a daily or on a very occasional basis. The authors also note the need for more research about pornography use and relationship satisfaction with the LGBT population.

**“FEMALE PARTNERS MAY FIND PORNOGRAPHY TO BE A SOURCE OF COMPETITION IN THAT THEY MAY NOT BE SATISFYING THEIR PARTNERS' NEEDS; THE MORE DISCLOSURE THAT MEN PROVIDE TO THEIR FEMALE PARTNERS, THE MORE UPSET THAT WOMEN MAY FEEL AS THEY FIND OUT THAT THEIR PARTNER IS USING MORE PORN THAN ORIGINALLY EXPECTED.”**

(Resch & Alderson, 2013, p. 11)

Research has also found that the level of commitment in a relationship affects how pornography use is viewed. Some studies show that women married to men who use pornography report higher levels of distress with pornography use than women in dating situations (Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003). Bridges and colleagues surveyed 100 women in romantic relationships with men who used pornography and concluded that the frequency of pornography use affected the level of women's distress. Women in their study reported higher levels of distress if their partners used porn frequently and for long periods of time. Over one third of their sample reported highly negative feelings about pornography and experienced significant distress over their partner's use of pornography.

The acceptance of pornography use in a relationship has been found to be higher among men than among women, although recent research shows that some women are also accepting of pornography to some extent. A study of 404 undergraduate students found a wide range of opinions regarding the use of pornography in committed relationships (Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). Of those surveyed, 70% of men and 45% of women reported that pornography use was acceptable in a relationship. Among those who were accepting of pornography, more women than men qualified their acceptance based on the frequency of pornography use. Many women indicated that they would become less accepting of pornography use if it became habitual and developed into an addiction. Almost equal percentages of men (22%) and women (26%) surveyed felt that pornography use was unacceptable in their relationships (Olmstead et al.).

**“PERSONALLY, I DON'T BELIEVE IT'S BAD OR IT'S GOOD. SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL SIMPLY SHOWS HUMAN SEXUALITY PUT INTO ACTION. ONE PARTNER OR THE OTHER CAN VIEW IT AS LONG AS BOTH CONSENT TO THE SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL. HOWEVER, IT SHOULD NOT TAKE AWAY FROM THE OVERALL PASSION OF THE RELATIONSHIP, AND IF IT DOES THEN IT HAS BECOME EXCESSIVE.”**

(20 year-old woman cited in Olmstead et al., 2013, p. 630)



"I DON'T THINK VIEWING SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL WHILE IN A RELATIONSHIP IS OKAY AT ALL, WHETHER ALONE OR TOGETHER. IF MY BOYFRIEND NEEDED TO VIEW SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL TO GET PLEASURE, I WOULD INTERPRET IT AS HIM BEING DISSATISFIED WITH ME. I FIND THAT A MAN WHO VIEWS PORN IS SIMILAR TO [A]MAN CHOOSING TO ENGAGE IN SEXUAL ACTIVITIES WITH ANOTHER WOMAN."

(19 year-old woman cited in Olmstead et al., 2013, p.631)

"VIEWING PORN CAN BE POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS TO A RELATIONSHIP. IF VIEWED ALONE, WITHOUT A PARTNER KNOWING IT CAN CREATE SECRETS IN THE RELATIONSHIP AND COULD BE THE FIRST STEP TO CHEATING. IT COULD, HOWEVER, BE USED AS A WAY TO SPICE UP THINGS IN THE BEDROOM IF VIEWED TOGETHER."

(22 year-old man cited in Olmstead et al., 2013, p.628)

A recent survey of 617 married or cohabiting couples examined the use of pornography in the context of a committed relationship and looked at how porn use affected relationship satisfaction (Poulson, Busby, & Galovan, 2013). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 58 and were affiliated with the RELATionship Evaluation, an ongoing project in the U.S. that focusses on relationship issues. When asked about pornography use, 64% of women reported no pornography use at all, 30% used pornography once a month or less, and less than 2% of women used pornography more than once a week. In contrast, fewer men (27%) reported never using pornography but those that did use pornography showed a range of frequency of use, with 31% using once a month or less, 16% using 2 to 3 days a month, 16% using 1 to 2 times a week and 10% using 3 or more days a week. Men were much more likely than women to perceive porn as erotic. Women were more likely to be neutral in how they perceived porn (i.e. not strictly erotic but not strictly degrading to women). The study also showed that all participants who characterized themselves as being very religious were more likely to report that they never used pornography (Poulson et al.).

Some studies have suggested that solitary male porn use is often seen by female partners as being alienating and not as an activity that contributes to a relationship (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Research has also shown that pornography use is less common among married couples who report satisfaction with their relationship, and more common among married couples who are unhappy in their relationship (Bridges & Morokoff). In the Poulson et al., study, male pornography use was shown to negatively affect the quality of sexual experience for both men and women. However, female pornography was associated with a slightly increased quality of sexual experience for both men and women. The authors note that many women who used pornography did so with their partners, and thus it may be the fact of mutually viewing porn that increased sexual satisfaction, rather than the fact that a female partner chose to use porn. As well, those women who used pornography tended to report higher levels of sexual desire than those who didn't, which also may account for an increased enjoyment of sexual activity.

## WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

The availability of pornography in today's society has implications for heterosexual couples in committed sexual relationships. Pornography use by one or both partners may directly impact both sexual enjoyment and relationship satisfaction. Research indicates that men are more accepting of pornography use in a relationship than are their female partners, and they also report more pornography use than women. While pornography use by men tends to be a solitary activity, women are often involved in mutual pornography use with their partners. Studies that explored the



connection between relationship satisfaction and pornography have found that pornography use by men often has a negative effect on relationship satisfaction for both partners, while pornography use by women may slightly increase relationship satisfaction for both men and women. Future research needs to explore the impact of pornography use on the relationship satisfaction of LGBTQ couples.

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