



Understanding Internet Pornography's Content and Its Relation to Adolescents' Sexual Attitudes

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English summary

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The Internet has allowed pornography to become more easily accessible, more anonymous, and more affordable than ever before (Cooper, 1998). Millions of pornography websites can be found, and it is hard to imagine a more revolutionary development in the history of human sexuality (Ogas & Gaddam, 2011). The use of the Internet for pornography has changed its production, distribution, and consumption. With many adolescents using this material, concerns about the impact of this rise of Internet pornography have intensified.

These concerns have become part of the long-lasting pornography debate, which is dominated by two opposing views (for an overview, see Linz & Malamuth, 1993). On the one hand, conservatives and pro-censorship feminists hold an anti-pornography point of view, in which pornography is understood as harmful. Pornography is argued to promote gender inequality, as its content is said to depict sexual objectification, subordination, and violent treatment of women, and to disconnect sex from love. On the other hand, liberals and anti-censorship feminists consider pornography diverse expressions of sexuality. In their view, pornographic content provides equal opportunities for sexual liberation and empowerment,

and is essentially not harmful. Overall, the pornography debate appears to center on gender inequality or equality and the connection or disconnection between sex and love.

In response to the concerns about Internet pornography, researchers have attempted to investigate possible effects of Internet pornography, notably on young people. However, several aspects have been understudied in research on Internet pornography and its effects on adolescents. First, still little is known about the content of Internet pornography. This is a serious shortcoming as knowledge about how Internet pornography depicts sex and its social context is essential for understanding the effects of this material. Second, despite the large variety of content in contemporary Internet pornography, little research has distinguished between different genres, or types, of pornographic material. Third, studies on the effects of pornography on young people have linked the use of Internet pornography to adolescents' sexual attitudes, but the underlying mechanisms and individual differences in susceptibility require more research. With this dissertation, I aimed to improve our understanding of the content of Internet pornography and how this content relates to adolescents' sexual attitudes.

Understanding Internet Pornography's Content

To offer insight into the frequency and ways in which Internet pornography depicts gender inequality and sex without love, a quantitative content analysis of 400 popular pornographic Internet videos was conducted (Chapters 2 and 3). In addition, differences between several most popular types of Internet pornography (e.g., professionally produced content versus content produced by amateurs) were investigated.

In analyzing the depiction of gender inequality in Internet pornography, Chapter 2 focused on differences and similarities between men and women in the dimensions of objectification, power, and violence. Popular pornographic Internet videos in general, which can be referred to as mainstream Internet pornography, showed objectification of both male

and female characters. However, the specific ways of this objectification differed between men and women. For women, objectification more often occurred through depicting them as instruments for male pleasure (instrumentality), whereas men were more often objectified through dehumanization.

As for the portrayal of power, the depiction of social and professional status was equal for men and women, but when a power difference was portrayed during sex, men were more likely dominant and women submissive. Most videos did not depict violence. In the instances that physically violent acts were portrayed, these mainly included spanking and gagging of women, to which women typically responded in a neutral or positive way. Non-consensual sex was uncommon and equally likely depicted for men and women.

Chapter 2 also compared two main types of Internet pornography: amateur versus professional videos, which led to some unexpected differences in the portrayal of men and women. In contrast to positive expectations of amateur pornography offering opportunities for empowerment and diversity (e.g., Attwood, 2009), these videos were found to depict more gender inequality than professional videos. For example, in comparison to men, women in amateur videos were less likely to initiate sex, more likely to be manipulated into sex, and more likely portrayed in lower social or professional positions.

To explore Internet pornography's depictions of love in the context of sex, Chapter 3 focused on the extent to which popular pornographic Internet videos depicted commitment, intimacy, and passion. The results showed that Internet videos most often included intimacy and passion in its depiction of the context of sex, but rarely depicted sex in a committed relationship context. Sex was, thus, most often portrayed in a casual context. In addition, although kissing, caressing, and looking into each other's eyes, were not uncommon as forms of intimacy, these were only shown in around half of the sex scenes. Passion could be seen in

almost all videos, but was mainly depicted in the motivation of engaging in sex for pleasure and enjoyment (in contrast to sharing love and affection).

Chapter 3 also found that amateur, professional, and teen videos varied significantly in the frequency and the way in which they portrayed commitment, intimacy, and passion in its depictions of sex. Compared to professional videos, amateur videos more frequently depicted sex without love, as it contained less intimacy and more sex for non-passionate utilitarian reasons (e.g., for money or a job). Teen videos that focused exclusively on young characters depicted sex more frequently in a context of love, compared to video's that were not exclusively about teens. These teen videos portrayed sex more often within the context of a romantic relationship and for reasons of love and affection.

Understanding the Relationship Between Adolescents' Internet Pornography Use and Sexual Attitudes

Chapter 4 focused on the longitudinal relationships between Internet pornography and adolescents' sexual attitudes concerning both gender inequality (i.e., notions of women as sex objects) and sex without love (i.e., instrumental attitudes toward sex). Previous studies have found that Internet pornography use predicts gender stereotypical beliefs and casual, or instrumental, attitudes toward sex. The study reported in this chapter extended this research by investigating the role of different types of Internet pornography, the mechanisms that underlie the relationships, and individual differences in susceptibility to pornography effects.

The study in this chapter used data from a three-wave panel survey with a six-month interval among 13-to-17-year-old Dutch adolescents. It focused on three main types of pornography: affection, dominance, and violence themed. It also studied whether resistance to pornography underlies potential effects of Internet pornography on sexual attitudes, and

whether hypergender orientation moderates such effects. Results showed that the use of Internet pornography predicted later increased notions of women as sex objects and instrumental attitudes towards sex. In addition, more frequent use of Internet pornography predicted decreased resistance to pornography over time. In turn, decreased resistance predicted greater sexual objectification of women and more instrumental attitudes toward sex. Hypermasculine and hyperfeminine adolescents were more susceptible to these outcomes of Internet pornography use than other adolescents. However, none of the different types of pornographic content (affection, dominance, and violence themed) predicted sexual objectification of women, instrumental attitudes toward sex, and resistance to pornography.

Main Insights and Implications

The content analysis (Chapters 2 and 3) showed to what extent and in what ways mainstream Internet pornography depicted gender (in)equality and love, and identified genre differences in these depictions. The longitudinal panel survey (Chapter 4) improved our understanding of how the use of Internet pornography relates to adolescent' sexual attitudes, taking into account the underlying process of resistance to pornography and individual differences by hypergender orientation. Overall, the combination of findings from these studies have resulted in five main insights.

1. Contemporary popular Internet pornography calls for a nuanced understanding. The content of contemporary Internet pornography is more complex and diverse than characterized in some earlier accounts. It seems exaggerated to say that Internet pornography *generally* promotes gender inequality and *always* depicts sex as detached from love. The findings of this dissertation rather suggest that Internet pornography can portray both gender inequality and equality, and sex both with and without love.

2. As depictions of the social context of sex differ by genre, we need to take Internet pornography's diversity into account. The diversity in depictions of sex, love, relationships, men, and women can be explained by differences between pornographic genres, for example between amateur and professional pornography or teen vs. non-teen pornography. We need to move away from a notion of pornography as a homogeneous mass of sexually explicit material, as it seems more appropriate to refer to *pornographies* instead of pornography. Accordingly, there is a need for future research to distinguish between different types of Internet pornography.

3. How differences in pornography may explain differences in effects, requires more attention. The findings of the two content analytic chapters in this dissertation have demonstrated significant content differences between different types of Internet pornography. These content differences may translate into differences in effects on viewers' sexual attitudes. In the longitudinal survey used in this dissertation, no differences between affection, dominance, and violence themed Internet pornography were found. An explanation may be that the measures used did not tap adolescents' exposure to affection, dominance, and violence themes sufficiently. Consequently, it requires more research to unravel the role of content differences in pornography effects, and notably to create adolescent-appropriate instruments that measure the viewing of genres.

4. Resistance to pornography plays a mediating role between the use of Internet pornography and sexual attitudes. Viewing Internet pornography more frequently reduced adolescents' resistance to pornography, and reduced resistance, in turn, predicted stronger attitudes of sexual objectification of women and of sex as instrumental. As resistance to pornography appears to play a role in the occurrence of effects of Internet pornography among adolescents, one may consider ways to stimulate adolescents' critical thinking in

response to pornography. For example, sex education and media literacy programs, covering topics of sex, love, gender equality in pornography, may provide youth with relevant tools to improve their resilience to pornography effects.

5. Some adolescents are more susceptible to effects of Internet pornography than others.

Not all adolescents were equally influenced when viewing Internet pornography. Our findings showed Internet pornography to predict sexual attitudes of adolescents high in hypergender orientation, but these associations were absent among adolescents low in hypergender orientation. Adolescents who identified as hypermasculine or hyperfeminine likely already held notions of women as sex objects and of sex as instrumental – similar to what is commonly portrayed in Internet pornography. This supports the idea that, in this case, the effects of Internet pornography primarily reinforced existing attitudes. Furthermore, the findings of this dissertation resonate with current media effects theories, such as the DSMM (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), which emphasize the importance of individual susceptibility to media effects. Effects of pornography may not occur equally for everybody, but may particularly hold for adolescents with certain pre-existing attitudes towards sex, love, or gender roles. For these adolescents, watching pornographic content that is congruent with these pre-existing attitudes may reinforce their attitudes towards sex, love, or gender roles.

Conclusion

The findings in this dissertation do not call for immediate major concern. Although popular Internet pornography currently depicts some gender inequality, women were also depicted as having agency, in a more powerful social role, and violence was rare. In addition, whereas much Internet pornography portrayed sex in casual relationship contexts, sex acts were also depicted in contexts of intimacy and passion between the sex partners.

Furthermore, genres differed in their depictions of gender relations and love. The messages

sent by pornographic Internet videos are thus somewhat more nuanced and diverse than it is commonly assumed.

Regarding the impact of this material on adolescent viewers, this dissertation revealed a small relationship between use of Internet pornography and subsequent notions of women as sex objects and instrumental attitudes toward sex. Moreover, this relationship only occurred for some adolescents, which means that many adolescents appeared unaffected by their consumption of pornography. Internet pornography may thus not necessarily create a certain sexual attitude in each viewer, but may instead strengthen existing sexual attitudes. This implies that prevention and intervention programs on the potential negative effects of pornography may specifically be targeted at those adolescents who already think of women as sex objects and of sex as detached from love. Developing these adolescents' critical responses to pornography should thus be a focal point in such prevention and intervention programs.

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